

Agrarian Reforms in Asia: achievements and challenges

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Good afternoon.

I truly feel honored to be able to speak before you today. I have been given a few minutes to speak about Agrarian Reforms in Asia – looking at past achievements, and future challenges we face in the coming years.

I hope there are lessons here, especially for Indonesia, where the government has promised to redistribute nine (9) million hectares, and to address increasing agrarian conflicts.

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While Asia's rich cultural history goes back several centuries, our political institutions today are still young. Most of the independent nation-states of Asia emerged only in the past 16-70 years, the youngest being Timor Leste, in 2002. And democracy in Asia is even younger.

After gaining independence, at least 20 Asian countries attempted to implement land reform programs between 1945 to the present. Land reforms played an important part in nation-state-building – to address rural poverty and social exclusion. However, in most cases, agrarian reforms were instituted by states as a direct *political response* to social protests and agrarian revolts.

What were the *drivers* of these reforms? (slide)

- *First* was the process of decolonization, especially in South Asia where land reform was high in the nationalist agenda of emerging nation-states. In India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, reforms focused on dismantling of colonial

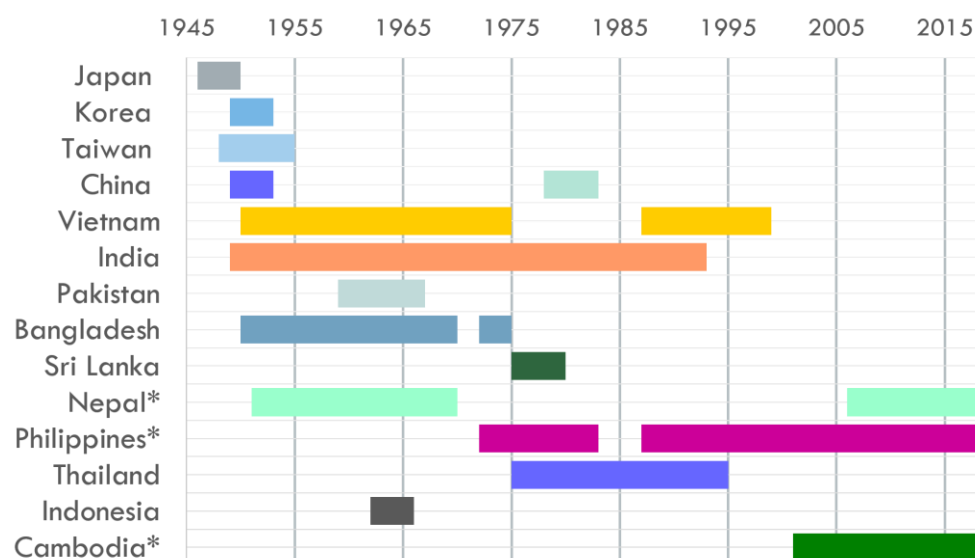
¹ Speech at the *Global Land Forum*, Bandung, Indonesia on 24 September 2018. Former Executive Director and Chair, and current Member of the Asian NGO Coalition for Agrarian Reform and Rural Development (ANGOC). He is also a founding member, and former Chair of the Center for Agrarian Reform and Rural Development (CARRD).

land systems – such as the abolition of the *zamindari* tax collection system, the recognition of tillers as owners of the land, tenancy reforms, imposition of land ceilings, and the distribution of state lands to the landless. However, reforms were poorly implemented, as the landed elite were entrenched in power. The more successful reforms were implemented in West Bengal and Kerala in India where socialist parties came into power. The less successful were Bangladesh and Pakistan, which came under a succession of military rulers allied with the landowning class.

- *Second* was the implementation of socialist reforms in China and Vietnam, which came in two phases: *First*, landlord properties were expropriated and redistributed to peasant households. Farms were then collectivized through cooperatives and communes. The *second* phase came in 1978 (China) and in 1981 (Vietnam) when collective lands were broken up and redistributed to individual households. This so-called “second land reform” was highly successful in addressing famine and hunger.
- *Third* was United States (US) influence in the East Asian region, as a reaction to revolutionary reforms in China, and to prevent the spread of Communism. US occupation forces provided advice and financial support for land reforms in Japan, Taiwan and South Korea from 1945 to the early 50s. But while these countries were heralded as “models” for agrarian reform, their conditions were not replicable.
- *Fourth* was the direct response of governments to peasant uprisings and social unrest at different points in history, as in Southeast Asia the Philippines, Indonesia and Thailand which fell under military-backed dictatorships. Some used their powers to implement land reform programs (Philippines, Malaysia) and others to suppress it (as Indonesia in the 1960s). Cambodia was a country in turmoil that underwent four property regimes within a single generation, spanning about 40 years.

- *Fifth* was decollectivization in Central Asia in the 1990s after the collapse of the Soviet Union. State-owned agricultural collectives were dismantled, and farms redistributed to their tillers and workers. (slide)

Periods of Redistributive Agrarian Reforms in Asia²



Redistributive Reforms in Asian Countries³

Country	Redistributed Area (hectares)	As % of all Arable Land	Beneficiary-Households	As % of Rural Households
Japan	2,000,000	80.0	4,300,000	60.9
South Korea	577,000	65.0	1,646,000	76.0
Taiwan	278,307	48.0	432,000	62.5
China	64,000,000	50.0	210,000,000	80.0
Vietnam	11,000,000	90.0	---	75.0
All India	9,850,000	5.4	12,400,000	5.3
- West Bengal	1,040,000	14.9	2,540,000	34.0
Philippines	7,328,453	58.9	5,250,822	42.3

² Quizon, A.B. (2013) *Land Governance in Asia: Understanding the Debates on Land Tenure Rights and Land Reforms in the Asian Context*. Framing the Debate Series, no. 3. Rome: International Land Coalition.

³ Data from Alden-Wily, Liz, Devendra Chapagain and Shiva Sharma (2008). "Land Reform in Nepal: Where is it coming from and where is it going?" and Quizon, Antonio, Dave De Vera, Anthony Marzan, and Mayette Rodriguez (2018). "State of Asset Reform in the Philippines". Final draft.

Although different countries took on contrasting (capitalist and socialist) paths to reforms, they eventually converged on one principle – *the need to strengthen small, family-run farms. (slide)*

Asia’s land reforms since the 1950s brought highly-uneven results across countries. (slide)

IMPACT	CHANGES	COUNTRIES
High	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rural transformation • Rural institutions & industrialization • Significant land redistribution • Rural poverty reduction 	China & Vietnam Japan, S. Korea & Taiwan
Modest	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limited land redistribution • Large private lands untouched • Modest gains in poverty reduction 	Most countries in South & Southeast Asia
Low	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Short periods of reform • Redistributions were reversed • Little or no impact at all 	Pakistan Indonesia Cambodia

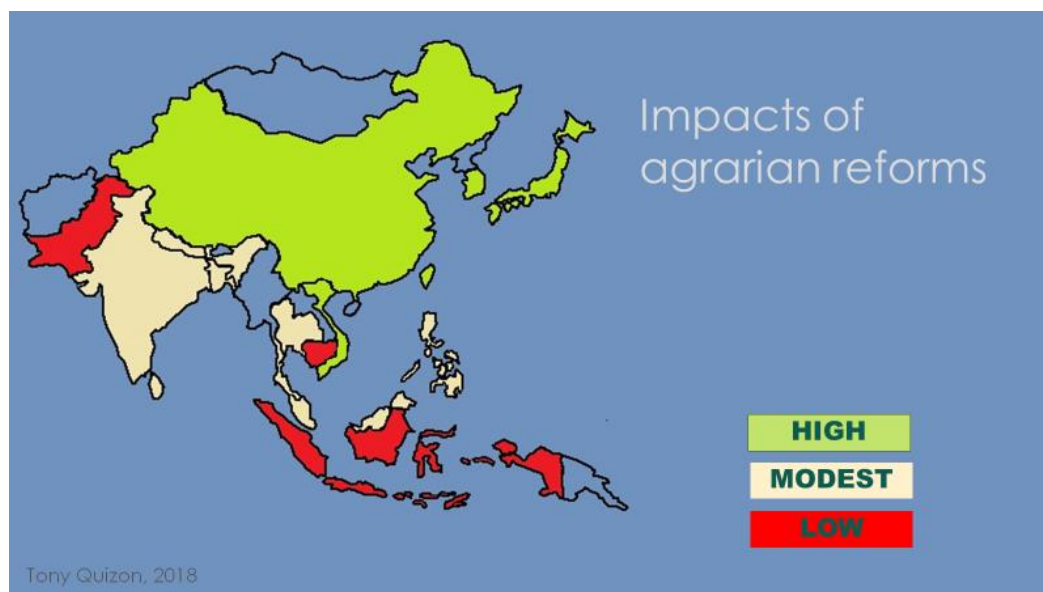
Land reforms brought about complete agrarian transformation in the five countries of China, Vietnam, Taiwan, South Korea and Japan through a highly egalitarian distribution of land and the development of rural institutions.

In most countries, however, (such as Philippines, Thailand, India, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh), land reforms contributed to increased tenure security and social improvement for sections of the rural poor, yet there was little or no transformation of agrarian structures, as large landholdings remained untouched.

In the Philippines, over 7 million hectares of public and private lands have been officially redistributed over the past 30 years. And yet, an estimated 20-30 percent of the beneficiaries are still not able to enjoy their full property rights – because of agrarian disputes, overlapping claims, indebtedness, and the unfinished subdivision of their lands. Moreover, many large private landholdings have not yet been distributed, while land conflicts have been rising since 2009. In 2017 alone, there were 1,500 pending judicial court cases, 76,000 administrative and quasi-judicial cases, and 64,000 cases of field mediation – all dealing with agrarian disputes in the Philippines.

Thus, the impact evaluations done on the Philippine Agrarian Reform Program have similar conclusions – i.e., while the Program has contributed to poverty reduction, the improvements have not been bold enough to bring significant numbers of the rural poor out of poverty.

Meanwhile, in other countries (like Pakistan and Indonesia) land reforms had little or no impact at all, as these reforms were stopped by military regimes, and their gains later reversed by anti-reform policies. (*slide*)



Where lies the agrarian reform challenges in the coming years?

First is the unfinished task of past land reforms that were never fully implemented, or else grew dormant over time due to prolonged and weak implementation and the lack of funding. (*slide*) Many past land reform legislations were often the result of *compromises* between peasant demands on one end, and the interests of a landlord class on the other end. But because of the dominant landlord interests in government, many reforms suffered from deficiencies in design and a lack of political will.

This has raised a core question: Can the government truly take the role of a land activist?

From our experience, the implementation of agrarian reform will need constant political pressure and monitoring from the social movements and civil society, as we have consistently tried to do for the past 30 years in the Philippines.

As land activists, we know how important it is for a family to have secure tenure to land, especially among those who have experienced the pain of eviction, and the demolition of people's homes.

Even in places where land is scarce, the rural poor should at least be entitled to a homelot. Studies show that families with secure homelots, say, of 100-300 square meters, are better able to find work, engage in livelihoods, gain greater access to social services, and find social protection from relatives and the community in times of need.

Second is the issue of women's land rights. *(slide)* Past land reform programs often failed to recognize the importance of the way in which control of assets, in particular land, is assigned within the household. This resulted in the relative neglect of women's rights to land in many land reform programs. It was wrongly assumed that "women's interests were subsumed within those of the household and could adequately be represented by men." In most countries, the man is often considered as the head of the family, and this status gives him authority over decisions on property and land.

Thus, under the Philippine agrarian reform program, despite existing laws that establish equal land rights, women constitute only 30 percent of all listed agrarian reform beneficiaries, and 29 percent of all holders of land ownership certificates.

There are efforts to recognize women's land rights. In Nepal, the government started to issue joint ownership certificates at the cost of 100 rupees (or more than one US dollar). In a country with high gender disparity, this is just a small but positive step.

Studies shows that when productive assets (especially land) are placed in women's hands, they can make a big difference. Households where women control greater shares of assets and land at marriage have been shown to spend

more on basic household needs such as food and on children's welfare and education.

Independent land rights for women is a necessary first step towards increasing women's control of assets. Women with land would have greater bargaining power. This would enable them to negotiate more equal allocations in the family and higher wages in the labor market. Formal land titles and entitlements would contribute to improving women's access to production credit. Titles would also empower women to assert themselves better with external agencies that provide inputs and extension services. Land rights would further empower women by improving the treatment they receive from other villagers, and by increasing their access to rural decision-making bodies as well as to farmers' institutions.

The importance of equal and independent land rights for rural women has taken an added dimension in recent decades as Asian agriculture gets increasingly feminized – as men migrate to the cities in search of work, and women are left behind.

Third is the long-standing issue of restitution of land rights for Asia's estimated 260 million indigenous peoples. (slide)

Indigenous peoples comprise as much as 30% of the populations in Laos and Burma, 12-14% in the Philippines, and 1% in Cambodia and Thailand. Actual numbers range from a high of 30 to 40 million in Indonesia, to a low of 200 thousand in Cambodia. Indigenous people rank among the poorest in terms of incomes and access to justice. They constitute a large proportion of internally displaced populations (India).

Indigenous peoples were victims of Western colonization that drove off natives from arable lands, then started to intrude into their forest areas. After independence, our nation-states inherited all colonial laws and property. The Regalian doctrine of "all lands belong to the King" became "all lands belong to the State". Native populations were disenfranchised. Yet the conflicting claims over indigenous peoples' lands were left unresolved – mainly because the State itself became an interested party or claimant over these lands.

Thus, Asia's indigenous peoples were largely ignored by past land reforms. In some cases, they even became victims of state-supported migration programs such as the *Transmigrasi* program in Indonesia. In the Philippines, there are even cases where lands of indigenous peoples have been distributed to farmers under agrarian reform – creating more conflict between sectors of the rural poor.

Today, only a few Asian countries recognize indigenous peoples' rights, even with international declarations, such as the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP).

The Philippines has perhaps one of the most progressive legislations – the Indigenous People's Rights Act. Over the past 20 years, more than five (5) million hectares or 17 percent of the country's land area, have been titled to Indigenous Cultural Communities. Few countries in the world can lay claim to a similar achievement. And yet, in many areas, these Titles are not respected. Government agencies continue to issue concessions, permits and licenses over ancestral domains. Migrants and investments continue to encroach on indigenous peoples' lands.

In the Philippines, the last remaining forests lie in indigenous peoples' domains. Out of the 128 key biodiversity areas, 96 sites or 75 percent are with traditional territories of indigenous communities. In light of climate change and the need to protect forests, this provides a new compelling reason for society to recognize and protect indigenous peoples' rights to land and self-governance.

Fourth is the challenge of implementing tenure reforms in forests and “public domain” lands in the midst of growing competition. (slide)

Today, over half of the land mass in all countries is controlled by the State, and in some countries, it is closer to 100 percent. In Indonesia, some 120 million hectares, or about 63 percent is state lands, also known as forest lands or the “public domain”. In the Philippines, it is 54 percent. “Forestlands” simply means land under the State, as in reality, many forestlands have no trees. Large valuable lands under central state control have made them conducive to mismanagement, poor resource utilization and corruption.

A CIFOR study in 2004 estimated that over 50 million people or one-fourth of the Indonesian population at that time, lived in forest areas, and 20 million more lived in villages around the forests and are dependent on forest resources. In the Philippines, an estimated 22 million people (or between 20-25 percent of the population) live in forestlands with no clear tenure rights or legal protection.

In recent decades, forest communities have faced even greater threats to their lands and livelihoods due to the intrusion of commercial interests, the expansion of commercial agriculture and forestry, extractive industries such as logging and mining, and the appropriation of lands for development projects and tourism. In Pakistan, Laos, Cambodia, Indonesia and Papua New Guinea, agreements have been forged between corporations and central governments for diversion of large tracts of land into “production areas” for food and biofuels that are geared for markets abroad.

In the interest of protecting and managing forest areas, some governments have recognized different forms of Community-Based Forest Management. However, Governments continue to be ambivalent about relinquishing or sharing real power, and about vesting significant rights in local people. Even where community forestry programs are implemented, government institutions tend to keep control of key decisions. They give communities access rights rather than management rights. Moreover, community forestry projects are often implemented on forest lands that have already been degraded (through timber concessions or new settlers), rather than on lands that are pristine and need to be protected. Community access rights to forests are often restricted, while the more valuable forest resources such as timber are granted as concessions to more powerful interests.

Fifth, there is the need to protect Asia’s small farms that agrarian reforms seek to promote. (slide)

Asia is home to 75 percent of the world’s farming households, 80% of whom are small-scale farmers and producers.

In many Asian countries, smallholders are the main producers of staples such as rice, corn, root crops and pulses, thus highlighting their important contributions to food security. Small farms also serve as *conservators* as they also tend to grow a wider variety of crops and cultivars; these, in turn, serve to increase the resiliency of farms against pests, diseases, droughts and other stresses.

Yet, small farms are facing enormous pressures. One is massive landgrabbing. In Cambodia, over 2.5 million hectares have been awarded to corporations under Economic Land Concessions (for 99 years), taking away large agricultural areas from small farmers. Some 21 percent of the Cambodian population are landless, and farming households own an average of one (1) hectare.

Two are policies that discriminate against small producers, such as price controls on food and basic staples (rice, corn, pulses) that are produced on small farms. Asian farmers now have to compete with heavily-subsidized imports from OECD countries.

Three are the changing rules of the market and supply systems that work against smallholders. There has been a major transformation of the agri-food industry in Asia with the gradual vertical integration of the food industry – from wholesaling, to processing and retailing. Governments have supported the restructuring of food sector through public investments and deregulation policies, while the integration of processing and retailing have been driven largely by private sector investments. The rise of corporate food traders and supermarkets has put small farmers in a disadvantaged position.

As food-supply chains are increasingly globalized, where will that leave our smallholder producers?

We should push for *food sovereignty* and the *right to food*. In simpler terms, this means that – to the extent possible, we should *reduce “food-kilometers”* or the distance where food is produced and stored, and where it is consumed. This will increase farmers’ control over their produce and livelihoods. By doing so, we also will reduce our carbon footprints.

Finally, we need to address increasing land conflicts, violations of human rights, diminishing political space, and the increasing harassment and violence to our land and environmental defenders. *(slide)*

Redistributing land and delivering justice to all victims of land-related violence is the first step towards lasting peace. For there can be no PEACE without JUSTICE and LAND RIGHTS.

In the recent experiences of the Philippines, Bangladesh (Chittagong Hill Tracts) and Nepal, we've learned that ultimately, discussions about peace is not about arms or armies, but ...

“Food and Freedom
Jobs and Justice
Land and Labor
Peace and Prosperity”

Thank you. *Maraming salamat po. Terima kasih.*

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24 September 2018*