

Opinion

# The agrarian issue and current challenges - Latin America and beyond

Monday 24 June 2019, by [MARTINEZ Elsa Nury](#), [TORREZ Fausto](#) (Date first published: 7 June 2019).

**Throughout history, the progressive transformation of agricultural production has at its basis the struggle for land. This struggle aims to introduce a radical change in the productive structure; as a consequence, the agrarian issue is significant for the coexistence of humanity and it was dealt with by the leaders of social struggle.**

Contents

- [Land and life grabbing](#)
- [Equity in Access to Land](#)
- [Challenges](#)

In this context, agrarian reform was based on liberal economical ideas, such as the voluntary sale of lands to poor peasants. Only in the last century did this concept transform into one based on the State's power of coercion; it can be said to be an unfinished assignment of capitalism. As a consequence, it is the responsibility of the movement of peasant and indigenous men and women to center this issue in our struggle against the ruling system.

It is vital to reactivate an agriculture with men and women peasants in order to cool the planet and solve the problem of world hunger. Studies by the Action Group on Erosion Technology and Concentration Group (ETC Group) show that peasant agriculture produces around 70 % of the world's food in 25 % of the land, while agribusiness, in order to produce 25 % of the food, takes up 75 % of the land.

This investigation dispels the myths of industrial and transgenic agriculture. The study ascertains that, if governments want to end hunger and put a stop to climate change, they must introduce public policies that promote peasant agriculture.

We all remember a historical event that changed the modern world: the Spanish conquest of Abya Yala, together with the exploitation of resources from the colonies in Africa and Asia. And so it is through that conquest, an unparalleled concentration of land was established in the colonies and, for this same reason, it was a factor targeted by independence movements.

As a result, over the course of our history, there are remarkable events such as the Artiguista Revolution (named after Jose Gervasio Artigas) in Argentina, which between 1811 and 1820, started a land distribution process that some historians have interpreted as a radical "agrarian reform" of the people.

Simon Bolivar and Francisco Morazan would do the same, granting land to their troops; then, Emiliano Zapata and Pancho Villa (1912 - 1917) retook the old Russian motto of the Narodnik

populists: “Land and Liberty” and finally, in the second half of the last century, the struggle for Agrarian Reform took shape.

A struggle that continues to this day due to the growing land concentration; the same old processes with brand new names, such as: grabbing, extractivism, monoculture and agribusiness.

### **Land and life grabbing**

The origin of “latifundios” (unproductive large landholdings) and agrarian property goes back to the arrival of the Spanish to America, with the imposition of a colonial system that massacred, enslaved and usurped vast and rich territories that had been occupied by indigenous peoples.

In the face of this exploitation, two revolutionaries in Mexico Pancho Villa and Emiliano Zapata took up arms to overthrow Porfirio Diaz and reorganize property in the country, implementing the first agrarian reform in the continent.

This revolutionary process left its mark and was then followed by the Bolivian Revolution in 1952 and the Cuban Revolution in 1959.

In 1917, while in Mexico the agrarian reform is carried out to the peasant outcry for “Land and Liberty”, in Europe the Russian Revolution produces major economical, social and political transformations, changing the property and land ownership system.

The agrarian reform process in the Russian Revolution extended to several countries in Europe, such as Austria, Germany, Poland, and others. In 1949, the revolution in the People’s Republic of China promoted a radical agrarian reform with the aim of nationalizing all land and means of production.

In 1961, the United States begins a campaign to stop the social mobilization that was taking place in the entire continent and president John F. Kennedy furthers the Alliance for Progress calling the nations in the continent to Punta del Este for a meeting with the aim of promoting land distribution in the American republics.

The Alliance for Progress attempted to diminish latifundios by way of a just distribution of property. By adopting agrarian reform, these governments pursued a variety of goals; among them, a higher rate of agricultural growth, with the aim of driving land owners to modernization, industrialization and commercialization of agricultural inputs. Conversely, if the property was not efficient, this simply lead to expropriation.

This way, the underlying economic goal of agrarian reform was to accelerate the countries’ industrialization process. The reach of the agrarian reform in Latin America varied widely, both in terms of amount of land expropriated as well as amount of peasant beneficiaries.

In either case, in the face of worldwide phenomena such as global warming, poverty, wealth concentration, land grabbing, agrarian policies, transformation processes and the reinvention of productive sectors, these are the issues which demand urgent and committed work.

Peasant movements constitute a social agent that promotes economic alternatives of awareness for the survival of the planet and a better quality of life for millions of people in the world.

## Equity in Access to Land

The equal access to land for men and women is a fundamental goal in order to overcome discrimination, the imposition of a sexist and patriarchal system that, for centuries, has rendered women's contributions to farming invisible, relegating them to merely reproductive roles. A true emancipation of women demands that they should be protagonists in the redistribution of land, with full participation and integration in all of the development processes in countryside systems and ways of life.

Likewise, women have always been, throughout history, collector and guardian of seeds; protector and promoter of biodiversity; guarantor of food sovereignty and ancestral knowledge. For this reason, we call for an integral and inclusive agrarian reform for Buen Vivir (good living).

## Challenges

**First challenge:** to transform the struggle for land into the struggle for territory; land is not just a place of work, it must be understood as a collective need, as a space for the collective organization of the peasant class, a space of resistance against capital.

**Second challenge:** to build a new model of production based on our own peasant agriculture. How are we going to use our land? What social function will we give to the land? We must focus on agroecology to produce healthy food in harmony with nature, and towards Food Sovereignty. A new technology matrix must be created, with specialized technicians that make it possible to multiply and produce in harmony with nature.

**Third challenge:** to achieve public policies that support the proposals of peasant movements in all areas—agriculture, housing, education, infrastructure, culture, etc. We need schools that strengthen our identity based on life in and for the countryside.

**Fourth challenge:** to carry out permanent processes of political formation. Around the world, the Left has had gaps in training. Our organizations have the challenge of building processes and political training spaces linked to the struggles of our organizations. We must create autonomous spaces for women, young people, and people of diverse sexual identities.

**Fifth challenge:** to create our own popular news and communications media that reach the people and that present our project to society. We need to strengthen dialogue both with our own bases and with society at large. We have to win hearts and minds

**Sixth challenge:** to build an alliance between popular sectors in the countryside and the city. In the countryside, we must join efforts with other organizations that fight to defend territories, like indigenous peoples. And in the city with the working class, as our allies.

**Seventh challenge:** to organize and carry out more significant joint mobilizations against our enemies at the international level.

**Eighth challenge:** to strengthen internationalist solidarity by seeking creative ways to implement support in moments of crisis and mobilize the capacity for outrage

**Ninth challenge:** To promote the global campaign for agrarian reform of the people. Since 1996, this campaign has supported local struggles, intervening against human rights violations, spreading information from local and national movements through research missions. To organize international

advocacy tours to study and observe peasant and indigenous struggle.

Recently, we celebrated a meeting of the Land, Water and Territory Collective. There, our main agreement was to relaunch the Global Campaign for Agrarian Reform in the VII Congress of the CLOC in Cuba, where we will develop an action plan for the continent in order to bring visibility to Integral and Popular Agrarian Reform as the basis of Food Sovereignty and Agroecology in the context of the Decade of Family Farming and Peasant Agriculture.

**Fausto Tórrez and Elsa Nury Martínez**

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## **P.S.**

- La Via Campesina, 7 JUNE 2019:

<https://viacampesina.org/en/opinion-the-agrarian-issue-and-current-challenges/>

- This Article by Fausto Tórrez and Elsa Nury Martínez was originally published in the Revista América Latina en Movimiento No. 541, Por la tierra y derechos campesinos: CLOC 25 años [Latin America in Motion Journal, For the Land and Peasant Rights]:

<https://www.alainet.org/es/revistas/541>

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