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**IFAD**

**INTERNATIONAL FUND FOR AGRICULTURAL DEVELOPMENT**

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**ROUND-TABLE DISCUSSIONS**

**SECURING ACCESS TO LAND FOR THE RURAL POOR**

The present note provides a conceptual framework for the round-table discussion on access to land by the rural poor. The round table, conceived as a knowledge- and experience-sharing event, offers an opportunity to bring together the perspectives of governments, farmers' organizations and social movements, of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, the International Land Coalition and IFAD. The objectives of the round table are to:

- reaffirm the need for improved access to land and security of land tenure in order to effectively and sustainably reduce rural poverty, both in terms of equity and efficiency; and
- share and discuss issues faced by committed governments in the articulation, implementation and enforcement of pro-poor land policies and agrarian reform.

### **A. The Rural Dimension of Poverty**

1. The most basic and undisputed fact about extreme poverty, worldwide, is that it is overwhelmingly rural. Three quarters of all extremely poor people in the developing world live in rural areas and depend on agriculture and agriculture-based activities for their livelihoods. Consequently, any effort to reduce extreme poverty worldwide will need to focus on reducing rural poverty: enhancing the productive and economic role of rural poor people and enabling them to increase their agricultural productivity and thereby their incomes.

2. If one were to review a number of historical patterns, one would see that, more often than not, the countries successfully reducing poverty today are those that have previously made large investments in their rural areas and people. Countries that lag behind in this regard are mainly those that have neglected their rural areas and peasantry. Indeed, few economies have achieved broad-based economic growth without agricultural and rural growth having preceded or at least accompanied it. In almost every case, from Europe in the nineteenth century to the more recent cases of China and Viet Nam in the 1980s, agricultural growth has played a critical role in poverty reduction.

3. The contribution of rural and agricultural development to achieving poverty reduction is increasingly recognized today, as is the centrality of smallholder agriculture and its potential role in this regard. For example, the United Nations Millennium Project acknowledged that the global epicentre of extreme poverty is the smallholder farm. As these farmers also constitute the bulk of private sector economic activity in many developing countries, improving their economic lot will make a huge difference to their countries' prospects for long-term economic growth.

### **B. Land and Rural Livelihoods**

4. Land is at the heart of all rural societies and agricultural economies. Having it, controlling it, using it are among the critical dimensions of rural livelihoods and are vital determinants of rural wealth and rural poverty. In rural societies, the landless or near landless and those with insecure tenure rights often constitute the poorest and most vulnerable groups, especially women and indigenous populations. All attempts to substantially reduce rural poverty must address the critical issue of land. They must also address the fact that poor people's lack of access to land and security of tenure is symptomatic of key social relations, policies and institutions and of poor people's lack of influence over them.

5. In this context, women are doubly vulnerable and disadvantaged under most tenure systems. Inheritance practices and norms and procedures for formalizing land rights discriminate against them, despite the fact that women's agricultural activities contribute more directly to household food security. As a result, the weak and unprotected rights of poor women impact directly on household vulnerability and livelihoods. Strengthening their rights to land, therefore, will contribute not only to gender equality but also to poverty reduction, since women are responsible for household subsistence production and welfare.

6. Land issues impinge upon the everyday choices and prospects of rural poor people. For example, land access and security of land tenure strongly influence decisions on the nature of crops grown for subsistence or commercial purposes. They also influence the extent to which farmers are prepared to invest (both financially and in terms of labour) in improvements in production and natural resources management and the adoption of new technologies, and have an impact on people's access to credit.

7. The structure and functioning of land tenure systems shape decisions on whether smallholder farmers consolidate their land holdings for commercial farming or whether they subdivide and fragment them for subsistence purposes among heirs and other family members. These systems may

determine how benefit streams from agricultural activities are divided among different individuals and groups within households and communities.

8. Land tenure systems can therefore have a major impact on the outcomes of externally supported projects and programmes designed to improve the livelihoods of the rural poor. For example, the introduction of new technologies often increases land values. If all existing rights (including secondary rights, group rights and multiple user arrangements) are not adequately considered, such schemes can result in the loss of access to land by poor and vulnerable groups. Similarly, the opening up of new roads can result in the influx of new, often better-resourced settlers, deforestation and in increasing social conflicts, often at the expense of the poorest and most vulnerable.

9. Finally, but most importantly, land tenure security is a major factor in shaping social relations and contributes to social stability – or in other words, land tenure insecurity contributes to social instability and conflict.

### **C. Prospects for Improved Land Access and Tenure Security for the Rural Poor**

10. Growing populations, intensive agriculture, declining soil fertility and greater environmental degradation have all increased the demands and pressures on land resources. Dynamics such as the HIV/AIDS pandemic and new opportunities for intensive agricultural production and commercialization have placed new tensions on land tenure systems, from which the rural poor are the first to suffer. Intensification of such processes as globalization and liberalization, urbanization and industrialization, and the concentration of capital and power, have led to tremendous changes in international economic and political relations, which, in turn, have unleashed national and local change processes that involve enormous challenges for the rural poor.

11. Indeed, rural poor people are now facing new forms of competition, not only in terms of productivity and products but also for the resources that they depend upon for their livelihoods. The underlying value of water, land and forests is rising in response to genuine scarcity or land speculation. In principle, this should be of benefit to rural communities as the value of “their” assets rises, but in practice it is a dangerous situation. On the one hand, small farmers are unable to leverage this increased value into greater access to investment capital. On the other hand, precisely the rise in value gives a greater incentive to elite groups to try to capture them. Rather than increasing the livelihood security of the rural poor, changing asset values mean greater competition with more powerful interests.

### **D. The Political Economy of Land and Agrarian Reform**

12. Agrarian reform is a social and political act. It addresses and usually confronts power relations within a society and thus it becomes an extremely sensitive and complex process. The formulation and implementation of agrarian reform and pro-poor land policies are generally led by governments. However, successful pro-poor reform depends not only on the political will of governments but also on the active participation of citizens and on a strong and vibrant civil society that can express the will of the people and, in particular, represent the interests of the poorest and marginalized members of society. Thus a major challenge for any successful agrarian reform and pro-poor land policy is to bring together policy-makers and civil society.

13. Civil society organizations, especially farmers’ and rural organizations, can play a critical role in influencing the formulation and implementation of agrarian reform policies so that they benefit rural poor people: by increasing their land access and improving their land tenure security. The role of such organizations may range from direct support for the implementation of government policies to research, public consultation and information dissemination, to advocacy in defending the rights of poor and marginalized groups, and to social mobilization in opposition to the vested interests of elites.

14. The capacity-building of all actors involved and the formation of broad alliances among them are conditions for pro-poor agrarian reform and land policies. Both should be guided by a long-term vision and an understanding of the dynamic, complex and evolving nature of the land issues faced by different groups of rural poor people in their diverse and specific localities, activities and social relations, and against a rapidly changing global environment.

#### **E. Land Issues and the Evolving International Development Agenda**

15. The general consensus is that not enough investment has gone into the strengthening of land tenure security and land access for the poor. During the 1950s and 1960s, there was more support for land reform but this declined in the 1980s. The 1995 Conference on Hunger and Poverty called for the revival of agrarian reform on both national and international agendas. More recently, there is increasing interest in supporting land reform and it is felt that this subject will become more prominent on the international development agenda in the immediate future.

16. A number of countries in Africa (Kenya, Mozambique, Zambia), Central and Latin America (Brazil, Mexico), Asia (Cambodia, the Philippines) and Eastern Europe and Central Asia (Albania, Armenia, Georgia) have reformed their land laws and land policies over the last ten years or are presently in the process of doing so.

17. Increased interest in land has also been fuelled by contemporary development research. At the macro level, recent studies have shown that countries with a more equal distribution of assets have experienced faster, more sustained and inclusive patterns of economic growth than those with a highly unequal asset distribution. Micro-level research into the causes and dynamics of rural poverty frequently confirms a close correlation between lack of secure access to land and poverty levels in many rural areas around the globe. Evidence further reveals that greater access to small amounts of land can have a significant impact in terms of enhanced food security and resilience of the rural poor to external shocks, provided they receive the necessary support services. The foregoing should not be construed as disregarding the potential role that pro-poor urbanization and industrialization and the promotion of off-farm activities can play in providing viable alternatives for rural poor people.

18. Additional issues that cut across land access and tenure security, but have not been addressed sufficiently by past land policies and reforms, are now being increasingly recognized. These include the importance of land access and security of tenure in the context of gender equality or of recognizing the territorial rights of ethnic minorities and indigenous people. Land-tenure security is also central to more holistic approaches for managing land and other natural resources in the context of decentralization and of devolution processes.

19. This new thinking, and particularly the increased awareness of the importance of asset distribution for long-term growth, poverty reduction and civic empowerment, has been echoed by recent World Development Reports issued by the World Bank and Human Development Reports by the United Nations Development Programme. Major donor agencies, including the World Bank and the European Union, have recently published policy papers and guidelines on land tenure. This increased awareness is also reflected in a growing number of land-related operations. For instance, in the case of the World Bank, land tenure-related operations have constituted the most rapidly growing part of its rural development portfolio.

20. The High Level Commission on Legal Empowerment of the Poor was recently established with the primary objective of identifying appropriate approaches for strengthening land tenure security for the poor. Some concerns have been raised regarding the potential bias to individualized titling of primary rights without appropriate consideration being given to common property resources and multiple user arrangements upon which the livelihoods of rural poor people depend. Nevertheless, the commission is likely to place greater stress on the importance of land tenure security.

21. At the present time, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations is engaged in organizing an International Conference for Agrarian Reform and Rural Development (ICARRD), to be hosted by the Government of Brazil in March 2006. Among other things, the conference will discuss the importance of land access and security of land tenure for rural poor people.

#### **F. IFAD and Land Issues**

22. IFAD is dedicated to reducing rural poverty; as such it is obliged to come to terms with land issues and the social, policy and institutional dimensions of those issues. Its strategic framework accords priority to enhancing the access of the rural poor to land and other natural resources, as reflected in its regional strategies.

23. IFAD has addressed land issues facing rural poor people, mainly through its projects and programmes. Principle areas in this regard have been: pro-poor land policy formulation and implementation; land redistribution; land titling; access to common property resources and multiple user arrangements so critical for the livelihoods of rural poor people; strengthening security of land tenure; land conflict resolution; strengthening the links between land-tenure security and land-use; and sustainable management. Particular focus has been placed on the land rights of women, pastoralists and indigenous peoples; secondary and communal rights; and on strengthening decentralized land administration systems, both statutory and customary. In order to address the political sensitivities and complexities involved, IFAD has forged partnerships with governments, civil society organizations and diverse development actors.

24. As one of its founding members, IFAD presently houses the secretariat of the International Land Coalition. The Land Coalition was established to strengthen alliances of civil society organizations and inter-governmental organizations in the formulation and implementation of projects and programmes and in policy dialogue on land tenure security and land access for the rural poor.

25. IFAD recognizes that much more needs to be done to adequately mainstream – both in its projects and programmes and in policy dialogue engagements – the various factors bearing upon access to, and control of, land among the diverse groups of rural poor people and thus influence their prospects for better rural livelihoods. It also recognizes that a more focused approach should be taken to ensuring that land issues play a central role in the development process, bearing in mind the marked regional diversities and national specificities that exist.

26. IFAD does not believe in prescriptive policies and uniform, blueprint solutions. Solutions to the land issues faced by rural poor people must be informed by the concrete, dynamic, highly diversified and complex realities confronting them. To that end, one of IFAD's major contributions is its support to strengthening the capacity of farmers' and rural organizations to actively participate in policy processes so that they articulate those realities and accordingly influence policy decisions. Equally important, IFAD plays a catalytic and facilitating role: creating space for dialogue and debate among diverse actors, whether from governments, rural organizations or other civil society movements.

**G. Indicative Questions for Discussion**

27. What are the main challenges of pro-smallholder farmer and gender-sensitive agrarian reform and land policies? In practice, what are the trade-offs and complementarities between land redistribution and economies of scale, and between agrarian reform and pro-poor urbanization and industrialization? What have been some concrete experiences in dealing with these challenges?

28. Another set of challenges relate to common property resources and the rights of such marginalized and vulnerable groups as pastoralists and indigenous peoples. What have been the concrete experiences of participants in dealing with these challenges?

29. What are the capacity-building needs of government and rural organizations so that they contribute to the articulation, implementation and enforcement of pro-poor and equitable land policies and agrarian reform? How can organizations such as IFAD respond to these needs?

30. Do the policies and positions of international development agencies influence government policies and actions? What have been some concrete experiences in this regard?

**THE IMPORTANCE OF LAND AND RESOURCE RIGHTS  
IN ACHIEVING THE MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS\***

*Strengthening the rights of poor men and women to land and natural resources is indispensable to achieving the Millennium Development Goals.*

**GOAL 1: ERADICATE EXTREME POVERTY AND HUNGER**

Where their rights to land are secure and other production services made available, poor men and women can improve production and income – from both agricultural and non-agricultural sources – thereby improving their food security and reducing hunger.

**GOAL 2: ACHIEVE UNIVERSAL PRIMARY EDUCATION**

Without recognition of their rights, families residing on disputed land may be denied access to basic public services, including education for their children. Improved land access assists households to generate income and reduces the time children work to help support their families. The results include being able to pay school fees and increased school attendance.

**GOAL 3: PROMOTE GENDER EQUALITY AND EMPOWER WOMEN**

Women in developing countries own less than 2% of all land and receive less than 5% of all support services, despite playing a pivotal role in agriculture and household food security. Secure land rights for women contribute not only to economic empowerment for poor families, but also increases women's social and political power – contributing to a reduction in child mortality and improvements in maternal health (goals 4 and 5).

**GOAL 6: COMBAT HIV/AIDS, MALARIA AND OTHER DISEASES**

The HIV/AIDS pandemic has highlighted the consequences of women not having land rights or inheritance rights to their husbands' lands. Not only do these women lose their families' source of livelihood, they often have no choice but to enter into other relationships that may increase their own risk of becoming infected. This results in malnutrition and food insecurity, and has an adverse effect on HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment.

**GOAL 7: ENSURE ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY**

The real causes of resource degradation are rooted in imbalances of power, wealth, knowledge and access to resources. If rural poor households lack secure land tenure rights, they are compelled to adopt short-term survival strategies that have negative environmental impacts. Moreover, smallholder production generally carries less environmental risk than large-scale commercial production.

**GOAL 8: DEVELOP A GLOBAL PARTNERSHIP FOR DEVELOPMENT**

Land access and land use involves many complex social, economic, cultural and political relations. It is more than simply a productive asset or locus for investment. It is crucial that poor men and women whose livelihoods are directly affected by land and resource policies have the opportunity to participate in policy formulation and decision-making processes and partnerships at the local, national and global levels.

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\* Annex prepared by the International Land Coalition, Rome