

Guatemala and Integrated Rural Development: Towards Inclusive Growth in the Rural Sector

By Bridget Barry

1. Introduction

Access to land and its associated power has stratified society for millennia. Non-market functions of land have historically delineated political power structures, arranging hierarchical relationships predicated on land ownership. The productive functions of land, for agriculture or associated environmental services, have defined its economic significance. In the past 30 years in Latin America, paths to development have been navigated with private property as the guide, prioritising formalised structures of ownership and dispossessing traditional, communal forms of land use and control. Though State policies may recognise the political-cultural rights of marginalised populations in their pursuit for equal access to land, the “extension of the discussion into the economic realm” is often discouraged (Hale, 2009), and unequal land policy arrangements that maintain rural poverty and exclusion persist.

Borras and McKinley (2006) have identified stark land inequalities as a primary factor in determining extreme poverty at the global level, due to the fact that much of the rural workforce is without access to land as a productive resource, to be used to generate income (Borras and McKinley, 2006). Research on unequal land distribution has highlighted land reform as a means to rectify the unequal access to land, although “neither state-led nor market-led reform models” (Borras and McKinley, 2006) have proven to fully eradicate this inequality, nor necessarily generate sustainable ‘pro-poor growth’ in all contexts. Accordingly, Borras and McKinley introduced a four-pillared alternative approach to redistribution as a strategy that encompasses both the socio-political and economic nature of land debates through (i) independent organisations formed by poor people in rural areas; (ii) a broad pro-reform political coalition; (iii) substantial public investment; and (iv) a growth-oriented development strategy.

Using the severe land inequality in Guatemala as a case study, this *Policy Research Brief* seeks to advance the discussion on land reform and inequality in Guatemala through two dominant narratives on rural development within the country. Through a comparative analysis of the market-led reform methods implemented by the Guatemalan State since 1996 and the Integrated Rural Development Law created by civil society, this *Policy Research Brief* questions whether a redistributive land reform policy is a viable solution to land inequality in Guatemala, and how to unite conflicting strategies, to generate an inclusive rural development trajectory that addresses structural inequalities. Expanding on the conclusion made by Borras and McKinley (2006), it seems that ‘alternative reform’ outside the ideological dichotomy of market-led or state-led is the only feasible solution to Guatemala’s inequality, with the most notably absent pillar being pro-reform political support.

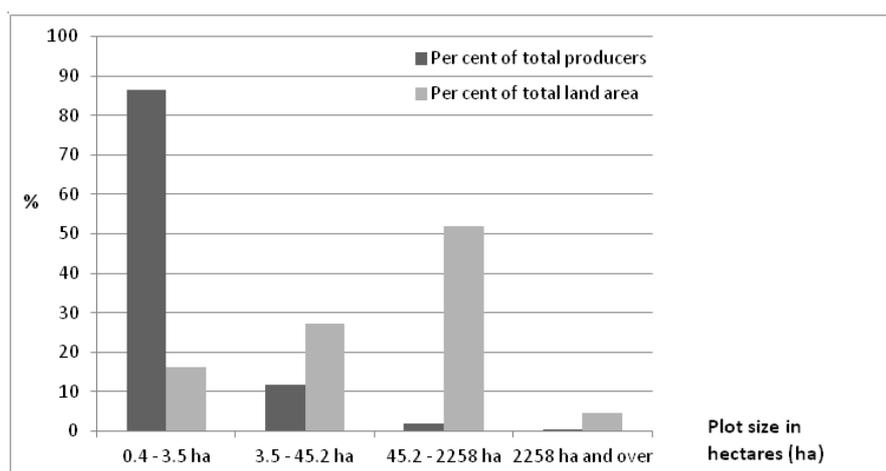
This discussion on land equality is particularly salient as countries throughout the Global South experience increased pressure due to foreign land grabs, biofuel expansion and population growth. Worldwide inequality levels have failed to abate despite economic growth, and the lessons learned from addressing inequality in Guatemala can assist in discussions on inequality both globally and throughout Latin America and the Caribbean, the most inequitable region in the world.¹

2. Historical Context for Land Reform in Guatemala

Guatemala’s land distribution is the second most unequal in Latin America, with 1.86 per cent of the farms owning 51.88 per cent of agricultural land and a farmland distribution Gini coefficient of 0.84 (FAO, 2004). Systems predicated on racism and clientelism² have maintained an elite, landowning class that presides over the indigenous population and perpetuates an inequitable arrangement in which political and economic power has been allocated according to land ownership and access to resources. Guatemala is the only Central American country with an indigenous population as the majority,³ but land is concentrated in the hands of large-scale farming minorities (see Figure, next page).

In 1952, President Jacobo Árbenz Guzman briefly instated Congressional Decree 900, a redistributive land reform policy that intended to rectify historical inequalities of land possession through expropriation of un-/underutilised land. Concerns over the threats of communism and its proximity to North America motivated US intervention and the following *coup d’état* that displaced the Árbenz establishment. The armed conflict that followed continued for 36 years, with the violence occurring primarily in the countryside. After many rural massacres, internal and foreign displacements and an estimated 200,000 deaths or

Figure 1
Land Distribution in Guatemala



Source: Author's calculations, using data from 2003 Agricultural Census.

disappearances, the state and the National Revolutionary Unit of Guatemala (UNRG) signed the Peace Accords on 29 December 1996. Of particular relevance to this case study is Article 6 of the Peace Accords, signed on 6 May 1996, entitled the Agreement on the Social and Economic Aspects and Agrarian Situation (from here onwards referred to as the Socio-economic Agreement).

Over the past 15 years, the dominant narratives on land possession and rural development in Guatemala have polarised, particularly in reference to land reform. The Socio-economic Agreement stipulates a rural development strategy that “facilitates access by small farmers to land and other production resources, offers juridical security and promotes conflict resolution” through market-led methods of land redistribution (GoG and UNRG, 1996). While some believe that it is a “lack of political will” (Gauster, 2005) that prevents the Guatemalan State from enacting a more reconciliatory position on land reform and rural development with the indigenous and *campesino* civil society, research shows that it is due to positions fundamentally divergent on ideological grounds, disassociating the definition of ‘land reform’ from its role as a process and redefining it as an indicator of an aversion to inequality.

State policies to address rural land poverty have perceived the challenge as one of availability, rather than access, using market mechanisms to facilitate redistribution. Land reform has become a rallying cry for *campesino*⁴ movements, and a *mala palabra*⁵ to State and elite actors, rather than a feasible process to resolve inequalities in land possession (Table 1 demonstrates the State’s strategic avoidance of land reform and equality topics in prominent policy documents). This polarisation has shifted both sides into an area of limited productive space to advance the discussion, with seemingly little hope that common ground can be found and maintained.

Furthermore, non-armed, social conflict pertaining to unequal land possession has persisted, as a vestige of the violence of the armed conflict. The social conflict that arises within and between indigenous communities results in community fragmentation and further disempowerment,

whereas the violence between indigenous communities and the government or foreign land owners has incensed radical social opposition to State land policy,⁶ further polarising the issue of redistributive land reform throughout Guatemala.

As a consequence of the socio-political nature of the complexities surrounding land possession, purely market-based mechanisms are ill-suited to resolve these underlying challenges. A comparative analysis of the implemented and proposed policies toward rural development since 1996 demonstrates this in greater detail in the following section.

3. Disparate Approaches to Rural Development in Guatemala: Finding Complementarities

The market-led land reform policies delineated in the Socio-economic Agreement coincide with a national policy agenda anchored in liberalising markets and strengthening private ownership of property to facilitate growth of a functional land market in Guatemala. The Socio-economic Agreement does not specify land reform as a policy priority according to government officials (Zelaya, in Anonymous, 2011) but, rather, outlines means to provide and access credit in the countryside through its land titling and regularisation programme, Fondo de tierras (Land Fund, from here onwards referred to as Fontierras).

Market-led Reform in Guatemala – the Case of Fontierras

Fontierras was initiated in May 1997 as an autonomous decentralised State body to facilitate and coordinate ‘transparent’ land sale negotiation transactions. Its impact has been marginal, and according to a 2003 agricultural census, between 1997 and 2003, only 4.3 per cent of Guatemala’s agricultural land had been reallocated, suggesting that only 1 per cent of the total demand for land had been met (Gauster and Isakson, 2007).

Those who have participated have either been under-informed and are now in debt, have chosen abandonment and/or have finalised their transaction with overpriced, inaccessible land of low quality. Additionally, in contrast to claims that market-led land programmes are more transparent, the politicisation of Fontierras has bred corruption that prioritises the interests of large landowners (Gauster and Isakson, 2007).

Table 1

Reference to Land Reform and Inequality in Prominent Government Documents

	Pages	Land reform (<i>reforma agraria</i>)	Inequality/unequal (<i>desigu-, desequi-</i>)	Equity/equality (<i>equi-, igua-</i>)
Agrarian Politics 2006 (Secretary of Agrarian Affairs, Council on Agrarian Politics, Government of Guatemala)	40	0	2	7*
Agricultural Politics 2008–2012 (Ministry of Agriculture, Ranching and Food, MAGA)	52	0	0	9
Plan to Enact the National Integrated Rural Development Policy 2012–2016 (Government of Guatemala)	32	0	1	0*

Source: Author's calculations using three prominent government documents addressing agrarian politics and national plans for rural development. *Additional references are made to equality as it pertains to gender only.

The programme structure evolved into a land rental scheme in May 2004 under the guidance of World Bank priorities to switch to temporary landowning land policies (Janvry and Sadoulet, 2002). Since then, land rental has been the preferred means to access land through Fontierras (Gauster, 2005), although the strategy has been questioned, particularly on its equity-enhancing or pro-poor impact(s) (Pica Ciamarra, 2004).

Fontierras's reliance on land rental schemes as the primary policy to address land poverty suggests a 'status quo' agenda by the Guatemalan State, and the circumvention of a deeper discussion on inequality. Through rental, the State erroneously perceives unequal land possession as an issue of availability, rather than socio-political structural elements of access. Indigenous groups without access are disempowered actors without a role in the market, facing cultural barriers such as language, lower education levels, and informal claims predicated on communal, ancestral rights. As a result, power structures of land concentration are left intact, perpetuating structures of inequality, discrimination and exploitation.

Furthermore, the socio-political context of land and land inequality in rural Guatemala is ignored, a critique frequently articulated concerning implementation of market-assisted land reform programmes. Politically, the commodification of land through regularisation prioritises private property, marginalising traditional methods of land ownership and management, while instigating a hierarchy according to economic means. It opens domestic land to foreign capital and practices that privilege extraction.

It also neglects the political power and prestige associated with ownership that belies a 'willing buyers/willing sellers' narrative (Gauster and Isakson, 2007), maintaining the concentration of land in the form of large estates. Additionally, land ownership often defines economic capacities, such as access to credit, and flexibility in management of the land. Land rental would prohibit many tenants from being able to fully maximise economic opportunities: renters are only able to use land for the sole function of productive capacity for agriculture.

Fontierras's land rental method, therefore, is merely mollifying. By providing land to the landless through temporary tenure strategies, the State has quelled, in part,

the unrest pertaining to land access and possession without addressing the fundamental elements of Guatemalan society's structural inequalities. Fifteen years hence the land reforms implemented following the Socio-economic Agreement have "failed to alleviate rural poverty and correct the country's concentrated agrarian structure", and the Accords have come to be perceived as a means to 'pacify' demands for land, or are construed as 'palliative' (Gauster and Isakson, 2007). Taken as a "broad condemnation of the country's structural inequalities", the signing of the Accords was a stride toward more cohesive economic development and participatory democracy (GoG and URNG, 1996), although many scholars have since referred to the Accords as a 'neoliberal peace', questioning the State's loyalty to a peaceful, social development trajectory (Gauster and Isakson, 2007). Due to the structural nature of inequalities in Guatemala, the role of the State as facilitator is integral.

Successful land policies have often depended on an active State,⁷ and market-led land reform in countries with historical inequalities have been proven to mostly strengthen the division between groups,⁸ rather than bring them closer to a point of reconciliation.

Integrated Rural Development Law – Initiative #4084

Following the evolution of the State's market-led land (reform) policy into a land rental scheme, civil society in Guatemala responded through the mobilisation of indigenous and *campesino* organisations arguing for fair and equal land access and ownership for the marginalised and landless populations. Through Fontierras, land has been traded without reference to its non-market cultural, social, economic or political significance. Guatemala's indigenous and *campesino* society seeks to reclaim the cultural significance of land by recognising its duality: as both a market-significant, economic means to rural development (right to productive assets), and a non-market, cultural right to 'territory', predicated on indigenous, ancestral and cosmological significance (social and political rights).

Through the creation of Integrated Rural Development Law #4084 (Initiative #4084),⁹ civil society has repackaged the long-standing call for land reform found in the Peace Accords negotiations and speaks more broadly to rural development with land ownership and distribution as a central element of alleviating rural poverty.

Based on the principle expressed in an earlier iteration of the initiative that social exclusion and inequality are the primary “obstacles to conserve peace and achieve sustainable human development in Guatemala”, Initiative #4084 identifies a clear role for the State in rural development efforts, especially in prioritising equality of access and distribution, and to “guarantee conditions of a decent life” for poor people in rural areas (ADRI, 2004; 2009).

Focusing on the need for a more locally-oriented approach and thus legal frameworks, the actors involved in drafting Initiative #4084 sought to clarify the Accord’s role in delineating the fundamental task of the “transformation of the tenancy structure and use of the land, having as its objective the incorporation of the rural population in economic, social and political development” (ADRI, 2009). The initiative, therefore, seeks to reorient the actions and role of the State toward fulfilling the tasks that it approved in the Socio-economic Agreement, with the aim of redirecting Guatemalan development toward human-centred approaches, prioritising rural populations in poverty or extreme poverty, particularly those with “insufficient, unproductive or without land”, in addition to small rural businesses and producers (ADRI, 2009).

To fully incorporate the marginalised actors into economic development efforts, direct reference is made to “equitable growth to all actors” and the prioritisation of macroeconomic policies that are directed toward strengthening “growth of the rural, indigenous and *campesino* economy” (ADRI, 2009).

Analysis

The government body National System of Permanent Dialogue (SNDP) facilitated Initiative #4084’s development and provided technical assistance. The official final draft can be accessed through the SNDP’s government website, and according to their announcement of the initiative, “it does not address an *agrarian reform law*, but rather an instrument of rural development, with global, integrated, sustainable focus, with the purpose of bettering the conditions of life of those that depend on agricultural activities” (SNDP, 2011; italics author’s own). SNDP, as a State body, ensures that the Initiative is not to be misconstrued as land reform. Public response to Initiative #4084 has since been divided. Minister of Agriculture Edin Barrientos denies that it will be implemented, and representatives of the business community claim that it “raises false hopes” for *campesino* populations (García Lara; in Batres, 2010). Despite this resistance to its implementation, the role of the State, according to Initiative #4084 is of “the highest order...as rector, promoter, facilitator, tutelary” of the policies (ADRI, 2009).

Although Initiative #4084 makes little reference to the role of the current officiating body, the Ministry of Agriculture, Ranching and Food (MAGA), and how its responsibilities will be transformed while enacting the law, the initiative proposes a new Cabinet and Ministry of Rural Development responsible for execution, which will coordinate with the Council of Social Participation and Auditing and other bodies within the State. The proposal of new State bodies unfamiliar to the current structure suggests distrust and a desire to remake, rather than cooperatively restructure, the

system, while recognising that the role of the Guatemalan State in facilitating a reconciliatory land politic is central to a long-term solution to the current impasse.

In a rejection of the market-led processes, civil society is demonstrating its resistance to the pervasive inequality and calling for policy that empowers the most marginalised populations. The Guatemalan Constitution’s Article 39, on the other hand, guarantees private property and has been used to justify smallholder evictions with informal land claims. The allegiance to private property obfuscates the discussion of ownership within indigenous communities, as traditional forms of communal ownership or ancestral geographies “do not match” those of the neoliberal structure (Wainwright, 2008). This “struggle over geography” (Said, 1993; in Wainwright, 2008) creates a clash between business owners, the State and the intended subjects/beneficiaries of Initiative #4084. A fear of expropriation and the current structure of private property force the question of whose interests will be prioritised in the politics of land possession in rural Guatemala.

The development of Initiative #4084 and its discourse on integrated rural development represents a political stalemate for advancement in the discussion on land reform. As ‘land reform’ is no longer a politically viable discussion point, ‘integrated rural development’ and ‘agrarian politics’ have emerged as the safer terms for vague political discussion on rural development due to their degrees of interpretation and potential flexibility in guaranteeing support from diverse actors. However, whereas civil society articulates integrated rural development as ranging from basic land reform to job creation, the State is more static in rural development objectives that grant leeway to preserve a neoliberal path to economic development through promoting rural non-farm competitiveness and maintaining private property protection.

The radically opposing positions catalyse the debate, trapping each actor in their interpretations. The intractability of the two positions suggests little potential for Guatemalan unity on the topic of land possession, inequality or reform.

4. Conclusions and Further Research

Since the 1996 Peace Accords, the narratives on land reform have polarised into a familiar dichotomy within Guatemalan society: a global, market-orientation toward national economic development incongruous with a highly localised civil society promoting agrarianism and redistribution of wealth through land. This divergence illustrates the conflict between the simultaneously conflicting global and local nature of the political economy of Guatemala’s agrarian structure, and the fundamental contradictions inherent within what has been referred to as the neoliberal capitalist structure in Guatemala (Robinson, 2000).

In particular, this Guatemalan case highlights the ‘taxes’ imposed on society by inequality, as indigenous and *campesino* populations rebel against the status quo, leading to violent confrontations and a divided society (Banerjee, 1999). In the context of structural and historical inequalities, market reforms have not satisfied the socio-political needs of the country, nor remedied historical injustices.

Table 2

Comparison of Fontierras and Initiative #4084 Land Policies

	Fontierras	Initiative #4084
Year	1997, rental structure initiated 2004	First draft 2004, submitted to Congress 2009
Structure	Autonomous, decentralised State body. Operates according to 'willing buyers/willing sellers' model. Preserves Guatemalan Constitution Article 39	Role of State integral: under a national system of integrated rural development, proposes a new Cabinet and Ministry of Rural Development to ensure completion and manage implementation
Objectives	To implement the following: (i) provide credit; (ii) solidify property rights; (iii) obligatory plan approval; (iv) negotiation between buyers and sellers; and (v) large quantity of buyers and sellers	To reform and democratise the tenancy, use and ownership structure of the land, disincentivising its concentration, while prioritising the following: (i) access to land; (ii) property rights regularisation; (iii) land conflict addressed; (iv) <i>campesino</i> economy stimulus through financial mechanisms; and (v) solution to the agrarian debt ¹
	Availability: Goal is to expand availability of land for ownership, through negotiation for sale or rental	Access: "Transformation of the tenancy structure and use of the land, having as its objective the incorporation of the rural population in economic, social and political development" (ADRI, 2009).
Beneficiaries	Based on economic viability as a purchaser, efficiency: Mandatory education levels, literacy, group applications	Based on need, equity: Prioritising rural populations in poverty or extreme poverty, particularly those with "insufficient, unproductive or without land" (ADRI, 2009).
Cultural flexibility	No recognition of communal land	Acknowledges traditional indigenous access right to territory beyond the social construction, and right to participate in the administration of the land and natural resources

Source: Initiative #4084 law, various documents on Fontierras policy.

Local recentralisation on agrarianism and its paramount importance in the rural structure has proved to be inconsistent with State efforts to promote economic development through global agricultural competitiveness and rural non-farm activities, isolating productive pathways to resolve land inequality. The 'generic' indigenous identity of social movements subsumes the participation of *campesino* groups, localising the battle and creating a geography of local issues that is incompatible with a rights-based approach or an approach which seeks to make growth inclusive. It maintains a localised discourse related to culture and land possession through ancestral claims, avoiding a clearer definition of economic and political rights for indigenous communities.

Through the lens of Borras and McKinley's four pillars of alternative land reform, what is most prominently lacking from Guatemalan attempts at achieving productive rural growth and equality is **pro-reform political support**. Political allegiance linked to estate farmers precludes the possibility of redistributive policies which will undoubtedly disrupt the current structure of the agriculture sector. Furthermore, Borras's fourth pillar of a comprehensive growth strategy is absent; the State and civil society are each aligned to opposing rural growth strategies that prioritise national competitiveness and accumulation, or small producers and marginalised populations, respectively.

An alternative strategy toward resolving land inequality is, therefore, urgently needed in Guatemala. Such an alternative should seek to generate both national and rural growth, without circumventing the discussion on equal access, while garnering the necessary political support for a long-term

approach to social and economic inequality. Recognition of the fundamental nature of agriculture in the rural sector of Guatemala requires policies directed toward technical assistance and extension services targeting small farmers, focused on enhancing production capacity and increasing output for farm products. An inclusive rural growth strategy must also incorporate all actors, encouraging cooperation between smallholders and large-scale producers.

These findings offer insight into the broader global discussion on land reform as well as power structures and relationships which will shape future negotiation and dialogue on land access in Guatemala. The proliferation of social movements founded on indigenous and *campesino* identities suggests that their incorporation into State decision-making processes can no longer be a question of debate or possibility but is one that is integral to national unity and long-term stability. Elite and capital power in Guatemala exists in a clear and important power structure. More in-depth study into the complexities of Guatemalan political parties and elite influence on land possession merits continuing and further research. ■

1. As it pertains to land possession.

2. Clientelist relationships is a system of social power based on a patron-client hierarchy.

3. Half (51 per cent) of the population self-identifies as indigenous (MRGI, 2008), although estimates range from 14 per cent to 60 per cent indigenous. Some claim that indigenous estimates are strategically reduced, and often data on land ownership or social indicators such as education levels are hard to disaggregate.

4. *Campesino* is a term used to describe a peasant or agricultural worker typically of modest means who maintains a subsistence lifestyle by living off the land. Because of the connotation of traditional small-scale, non-intensive styles of farming associated with this term, it is used throughout the study rather than 'farmer' or 'peasant', which have wider applications.

5. Translation: bad word (Villagrán, 2012).

6. The violent displacements that took place in the Valle del Polochic, Guatemala, in March 2011 inspired the creation of the Marcha Indígena Campesina y Popular movement in March 2012. For a more thorough discussion, see Barry, B. (2012). 'Rallying cry or 'mala palabra': The polarisation of the narratives on land reform and land possession in post-Peace Accords Guatemala'. Unpublished MSc Urbanisation and Development dissertation, London School of Economics and Political Science.
7. See Putzel (2000), Saith (2008) and Kay (2002).
8. See Borras (2003), relating to South Africa.
9. Developed by a civil society umbrella organisation, the Alliance for Integrated Rural Development (ADRI), the contentious initiative sits with the Guatemalan Congress to be ratified.
10. Summary of the Agrarian Policy aspect of Initiative #4084, omitting the various other Policies (cultural, labour, forestry etc.) due to scope.

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