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Food security, farmland access ethics, and land reform

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ABSTRACT

Though reducible by known means, food insecurity remains widespread, with tightening constraints on alternative policies to address it. In this article, we argue that in many developing countries more equal distribution of land is a key, yet often neglected, policy option, and that state-led land reform remains a major, ethically defensible route for addressing food insecurity and related disadvantages. In assessing empirically and ethically redistributive land reform to smallholders, we seek to advance the debate in global food security and to make a contribution to *farmland-access ethics*, that is, the moral evaluation of actions, practices, policies, and laws that affect farmland distribution, allocation, and use.

1. Introduction

Though reducible by known means, food insecurity remains widespread, with tightening constraints on most alternative remedies. In this article we argue that in many developing countries more equal distribution of land is a key policy option, and that, *contra* the received view, state-led land reform remains a major, ethically defensible route for addressing food insecurity and related disadvantages.

Land reform for smallholders (hereafter LRS) comprises laws to reduce poverty and inequality (and thereby food insecurity) by raising the proportion of farmland controlled by the poor, and thereby their income, power or status. It matters only if it has proved feasible; is not, as many claim, "dead"; and is ethically defensible.

In arguing for LRS, we see our work as a contribution to the global food security debate and to *farmland-access ethics*, that is, the moral evaluation of actions, practices, policies, and laws that affect farmland distribution, allocation, and use. (In philosophical ethics, there is no standard distinction between "ethics" and "morality", we will therefore use these terms interchangeably.) Our main concern is with the obligations of the state and the limits of state action regarding the interests and rights of individuals and groups.

We hope to sort out normative and factual assumptions behind conflicting positions about LRS as a tool to address food insecurity and related disadvantages. LRS is controversial; ideological commitments often replace ethical reasoning *and* evidence of consequences. Most agricultural micro-economists believe there is sufficient evidence to back the claim that not-too-unequal smallholdings in developing countries are normally "good" for production, though few macro-economists and policy-makers know this or acknowledge it. Evidence on different types of land reform is rarely examined in the farmland-access ethics literature, which focuses on principled objections to land reform based on the value of property rights (Caldwell and Shrader-Frechette, 1993). Yet the ethical status of land reform, as a route to increase food security, depends on its consequences vis-à-vis alternative policies *and* a case-by-case moral evaluation of its permissibility and desirability, despite rights-based objections. Such objections do not justify blanket rejection of state action to redistribute land as *a priori* rights-defeating and therefore morally wrong whatever the consequences. Consequences are not everything, but they too can be the basis of potent rights-based claims. Consequences always matter.

To make our case, we summarise, in Section 2, LRS history and, explicate and defend its main moral goals: reducing poverty and inequality of outcome, increasing equality of opportunity, and enhancing liberty. Of course, we acknowledge that other policy goals matter too: efficiency, stability, and sustainability (Lipton, 2009). Section 3 examines the evidence about the consequences of LRS with respect to its main moral goals. Section 4 explores further the domain of farmland-access ethics by asking whether tenancy, or alternatives to state-led land reform, can achieve those goals. Section 5 reviews a deep ethical objection to land reform: that rights-based arguments for legitimacy of incumbent landowners override consequentialist arguments in favour of LRS. Is this moral disagreement intractable? We argue that it is not. One *can* deliberate the permissibility and desirability of LRS case-by-case, but guided by contextually specified ethical norms. We finally explore the implications of our view for restitutive alternatives to LRS.

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2. What land reform is and why it matters morally

This section reviews the types, history, and moral goals of land reform (Lipton, 2009). "Classic" land reform sets limits (ceilings) to areas, allowing for quality, that one person or household may own. The vesting authority obtains above-ceiling land (with total, partial or no compensation) and (1) farms it (state farming), (2) distributes it to (non-voluntary) co-operatives or collectives, or (3) redistributes it as individual smallholdings, ostensibly to the farming poor. As a rule, state and co-operative *farms* have performed badly (although voluntary co-operatives providing *services* such as credit and marketing often work well (Hazell and Rahman, 2014)). That is partly due to state violence, extraction, or error in redistribution and management, but more fundamentally because farming is ill-suited to joint production or distant management. Farmwork is spread over space and takes much time. Hence neither co-operative/collective farmworkers, nor state farm managers, can readily observe specific actions of a co-worker, let alone their consequences.

In contrast, LRS has proved much more successful, mainly because in low-income developing countries farming is well suited to family/smallholdings. For these, labour screening, search, instruction, and supervision are relatively simple, but unit costs of borrowing and capital management are relatively high. So smallholders use more labour and less capital per hectare than largeholders (Eastwood et al., 2009). In low- and middle- income countries where labour supply is ample and fast-growing, while capital is scarce, smallholders cultivate more intensively, making better use of resources, raising income for employees and for themselves, and producing more per hectare-year. In high-income countries, rural labour is scarcer and savings (hence capital) more plentiful, so that the above argument has reverse effects: the labour-management advantage of small farms is outweighed by the capital-management advantage of large farms, so LRS, while still equalising, tends to reduce output. In the developing world, however, LRS is at least as likely to accelerate growth as to reduce it. Not only farms, but villages, areas, and countries with lower land inequality tend to show faster agricultural progress and overall economic growth (Lipton, 2009:84–86, 104–110).

2.1. What happened

Since 1950, LRS has, directly or through market responses, affected over 1 billion people (Lipton, 2009). These reforms provide substantial extra income from land and farmwork to at least as many, due to rural population growth—even after allowing for transitions out of agriculture, and netting out losers from reform. LRS affected, in succession, Japan, East Asia (not China), much of South Asia and Latin America, and some of Africa.

However, from 1910 to 1980, even more land reform has involved a "terrible detour". Large landholdings were indeed seized; were often promised, and initially delivered, as smallholdings to the near-landless; but, before such reforms could work, were forcibly shifted to state or co-operative/collective farming. This was imposed, in succession, in Mexico, the USSR, most of Eastern Europe, China, Vietnam, and some other Asian, African, and Latin American countries. This hardly ever achieved the poverty-reducing goal of land reform; as for the equality and liberty goals, wealth, power, and status often passed to a new elite of collective and state farm managers. Further, these big farms proved excellent vehicles for forced extraction of underpriced food, fibres, and timber, helping townspeople but harming the more numerous and weaker rural poor. Only after 10–50 years, and in the worst cases (the USSR and China) after tens of millions of deaths from famine and coercion, were these lands decollectivized. Sometimes (e.g., China 1977–1984, Vietnam, Armenia) this led to small, not-very-unequal farms: the terrible double detour, ending at last in real land reform, was complete.

Today, land reform is often pronounced dead. The story of compulsory state and co-operative/collective farming gives hopes that such "land deform" is indeed dead. However, LRS—alongside supportive investment and policy—has largely succeeded.

In addition, LRS is not made irrelevant by foreign farmland acquisitions ("land grab"). First, most acquisitions are *not* foreign: their extent and impact depend on LRS implementation. Second, in 28 countries comprising 87% of reported cases of large foreign acquisitions, they covered 27 m ha, with 12 m people losing their incomes (Davis et al., 2014): significant, but tiny compared to LRS area and beneficiaries. Third, acquirers cultivate below 15 per cent of land acquired; acquisitions have slowed since 2011 (Cotula, 2015:26). Above all, in 15 cases across Asia, Latin America and Africa, "the most successful cases involved investors who aimed to subdivide and sell parcels for individual family farms" (Byerlee et al., 2015). Land grab in developing countries notwithstanding, the proportion of farmland in small family farms continues to rise (Lowder et al., 2014:9): they favour land productivity *and* income distribution, and both help food security. Land grab makes LRS more important, not less.

LRS is currently active where it has been delayed (Brazil, South Africa), incomplete (the Philippines), distorted (much of the former USSR, Zimbabwe), or partly reversed (Colombia, Bolivia) (Eastwood et al., 2009; El-Ghonemy, 2003). Directly or through market responses (1 biliion), or by detour (another billion), land reform has affected 2 billion agriculturists and is still advocated in many developing countries (Lipton, 2009). To evaluate it, we specify its main goals and their ethical grounding.

2.2. Goals of land reform

2.2.1. Poverty and inequality reduction

Some land reformers advocate radically egalitarian *land outcomes*: all land, adjusted for quality, distributed in proportion to household size (e.g., China 1977–84). Most reformers pursue more modest goals such as reducing poverty and gross inequality of landholdings and consequential outcomes (assets, income, power, status, etc.). Such reductions improve food security—more so if due to LRS, which in low-income environments tends to raise land yields (Section 2).

The poverty reduction goal targets low-end inequality (e.g., the GNP share of the poorest or least-landed 15–20 per cent). Thus LRS aims at reducing rural poverty by providing farmland or home gardens to landless labourers or very poor farmers. Poverty reduction is justified ethically even if one values, not lower inequality, but a *sufficiency threshold* for each individual (Frankfurt, 1987).

An inequality reduction goal, instead, requires targeting top-end outcome-inequality (e.g., the income share of the richest 5 per cent) or overall inequality (e.g., a Gini coefficient). This suggests a ceiling: the maximum quality-adjusted land that landowners can keep after reform. Attacking top-end inequalities seeks to reduce elite power (Section 2.2.3) and to release farmland for a broader group than the extreme poor.

Several considerations justify the inequality-reducing goal, but we focus on two. First, inequalities due to luck are unfair because they're undeserved (Temkin, 1993). Often, land inequalities are ascribed (e.g., inherited) rather than achieved, reflecting a social lottery. In contrast, achievement partly reflects differences in effort; willingness and ability to defer gratification; and success in offering what is in demand: the more GDP is set aside for winners in the land-inheritance lottery, the less is available to incentivise or reward achievement through effort or ability (Lipton, 2009). Second, inequalities might be wrong when they create interwoven patterns of disadvantage that keep the well-being of individuals (i.e., the relevant outcomes) below an acceptable threshold and have cascading effects (Powers and Faden, 2006). This seems to typify land inequalities, which induce inequalities in several dimensions of wellbeing that matter morally: health, personal security, self-determination (Section 2.2.3), and respect by others, all mutually reinforcing. That is why land reform matters more where the poor have few non-farming paths to employment and self-enrichment (Section 5).

2.2.2. Equality of opportunity

Significant variation in undeserved advantage, such as inheriting land, can deprive some of the fair opportunities to compete for desirable goods and positions. While access to food might be guaranteed even with persistent gross inequalities, in developing economies they lead to unequal opportunities of access to political power to defend one's interests (Agarwal, 2014). Also, big property-owners (hereafter called "owners") have much better opportunities than others ("non-owners") to obtain high-quality education and health care, favourable work and leisure environments, and thereby opportunities for a long and happy life (Ghosh, 2008).

2.2.3. Liberty

The main goals of land reformers are to reduce poverty, high-end inequality, and inequality of opportunity. However, some land reformers might justify ceilings, plus distribution of above-ceiling land to the poor, by arguing that this increases liberty (Osmani, 2009; Borras and Franco, 2015). In our Millian view, an individual is free if she lives a self-determining life, that is, a life that is not in crucial respects dominated by others or the tyranny of necessity (e.g., being food insecure) such that it would prevent her from exercising her freedom (Powers et al., 2012). The liberty-enhancing state has therefore two roles. The first is to create or maintain social and institutional arrangements that prevent some individuals, groups, or bodies (such as corporations) from exerting arbitrary control over the choice of others: from operating like masters (Pettit, 1997). Arbitrary interference can be direct, a capacity kept in reserve, or displayed for intimidation. Informal or formal systems of patronage, for instance, are designed to control access to fecund options (upstream choices key to downstream options) (Feinberg, 1984). The second role of the state is to create or maintain social and institutional arrangements that enable or facilitate the exercise of self-determination by securing individuals' access to valuable options. LRS can advance these two liberty-enhancing roles to the extent that, having land of their own, the poor would be less likely to be food-insecure and vulnerable, and would rely less for work, loans, or trade on one or two local "rural tyrants" (Bell, 1990: 143–166).

Although land reformers pursue four distinct goals, these need not conflict and can be combined. Additionally, each goal matters morally in its own right. For instance, increasing liberty as non-domination matters even given inequalities of outcome and opportunities, because there is value in increasing individuals' control over their lives (Powers et al., 2012; Saghai 2013). That said, the relative value one attaches to different moral goals might affect choices *among* land reform policies.

3. The consequences of land reform

Are the consequences of land reform as advertised: less rural poverty and inequality; hence and otherwise, more equal opportunity; more liberty as non-domination; hence and otherwise, more food security? Lipton (2009) provides evidence, summarised and augmented below, for substantial net positive effects.

3.1. Poverty, inequality, and food insecurity reduction

First, close connections have been established between (a) poverty and associated undernutrition, and (b) rural residence, unequal and mostly tiny landholdings, and landlessness. Since the 1960s, sharp retreats of mass poverty have been observed after redistributive land reform, especially where there has been agro-technical progress and reduced population growth. Correlation does not prove causation, but direct, sequential effects have frequently been traced (Ghosh, 2008).

Second, *partly* due to poverty reduction, the risk of undernutrition decreases with access to farmland, even in small quantities. That is because (a) staples and some vegetables from small farms or home gardens (Galhena et al., 2013) are readily consumed by household members with minimal transaction cost or price risk; (b) the remainder, including some high-value crops, is sold, providing more diverse diets and an emergency reserve for sudden loss of income.

Third, rural Asia and Latin America have greatly reduced poverty and undernutrition. This was usually initiated by greater policy attention and spending to improve land-water productivity in smallholder agriculture—and accompanied by either initially not-too-unequal smallholdings (Petrikova, 2013) or farmland redistribution.

Fourth, in developing countries with many rural people per "efficiency-unit" of land, more equal family farming normally brings higher, and more poverty-reducing, output and growth (Sections 2 and 3.2).

Fifth, though many rural beneficiaries from poverty-reducing "Green Revolutions" since the 1960s were long-standing smallholders, many had received some or all their land through LRS or decollectivisation.

3.2. Equality of opportunity

If the poor obtain more equal land endowments, they gain from more equal opportunities—provided output does not fall. Demonstrating this empirical finding is crucial to the ethical argument for land reform on grounds of equal opportunity: it "bridges the gap" from equal opportunity to benefit.

Fortunately, despite some claims (Collier and Dercon, 2014), in low-income countries with booming workforces smaller farms bring higher labour-intensity — and hence more output, income, and food. This is consistent with trends in farm size. The proportion of farmland operated in farms below 1ha in India rose in each decade, from 7 per cent in 1960–1961 to 22 per cent in 2002–2003 (NSSO, 2006). A similar "rise of smallness" (despite land grab) is shown by decennial FAO World Censuses of Agriculture to be widespread and steady in most of the developing world (Lipton, 2009:95–102; Lowder, 2014). LRS itself initiated or supported such trends, but only in some countries and periods. Nor can the general "rise of smallness" be attributed to subdivision on inheritance, or to technical progress; these would not induce durable trends to smaller *operated* farms, unless such farms were efficient and profitable.

It has been objected that smaller farms (1) are increasingly and damagingly part-time; (2) are not viable; (3) are subdivided, thus becoming uneconomic; (4) eventually shrink below some lower limit below which further falls are undesirable.

(1) 20–40% of income in developing-country *farm* households typically comes from non-farm sources; the proportion grows with development, poverty reduction, and falling farm size (Haggblade et al., 2007). If farms get smaller in growing, poverty-reducing economies, farmers are probably choosing part-time farming, or part-time migration, as their path to diversification out of agriculture – a normal and desirable pattern in development. Part-time farms are typically as prosperous and efficient as full-time farms (e.g. Singh and Williamson, 1981; Chalamwong et al., 1983; O'Neill et al., 2002; Gudbrand et al., 2008; OECD, 2011).

(2) If "not viable" means "uneconomic", we have shown that in labour-intensive, capital-scarce low-to-middle-income economies smaller farms normally make more economic use of resources than large ones. Usually, "not viable" means "producing too little to fully meet household income requirements": the claim is that small farms cannot provide sufficient full-time livelihood for, say, a family (of four or five). But, first, the standards for "sufficient" are usually drawn from large farms and wealthy farmers, often beneficiaries of past colonialism or racial discrimination, and receiving many times the normal income of poor "indigenous" farmers (Moyo, 2007). When typical local standards are set, minimum farm size for a decent livelihood is much lower (Heie, 2003; Nagy et al. 2009). Second, the big and growing role of non-farm income for rural households leaves no reason why a farm need provide *full* household income. Third, if land sufficient for a

higher income is desired, that argues for more land redistribution, not less.

(3) In some countries (e.g. South Africa), subdivision of *farms*, below a size providing rather high middle-class income, remains illegal. As shown, there seems no economic case for this. However, subdividing a given size of farm into *fragments*, while it can have economic justification, costs – and deters – on-farm labour and supervision. But consensual consolidation of fragments is compatible with redistribution of landholdings (Lipton 2009:237–244).

(4) LRS often creates holdings of 1–3 ha, depending on land potential and availability. As populations and claimants increase, do not costs or inefficiencies increase, if farm size falls much lower? Most evidence suggests that, even among tiny farms, output per unit area still increases with falling farm size. On fertile irrigated land, a tiny farmlet or home garden – even 0.1 ha (Galhena et al., 2013) – in Bangladesh or Nepal often turns, say, a quarter of household labour, supported by readily available waste and wastewater, into even higher proportions of "decent" income, food requirements, or even sales.

After LRS, providing institutions — state, market, or co-operative — need time, incentives and help, in order to support smaller farms. Nevertheless, in sum, accumulating evidence shows that in low- and middle-income countries smaller farms normally produce more output, food, and income per unit of land; so LRS improves food security not only via equalisation, but also via enhanced production (Eastwood et al., 2009; Hazell and Rahman, 2014; Lipton 2009, chapter 2). Thus, in a developing country, mainly smallish farms within a rather equal farming system normally produce more per hectare-year than do large farms within a very unequal farming system. Thus LRS can improve food security not only via equalisation, but also via enhanced production.

3.3. Liberty

Evidence on the consequences of LRS is scarcer for liberty than for, say, poverty reduction, partly because liberty and related concepts (power) are contested concepts (Lovett, 2010), partly because certain components of liberty are not readily measurable (Carter et al., 2007: 441–481).

Evidence for the first component of liberty, reducing domination, is scarce, perhaps because establishing criteria for degrees and kinds of domination is difficult: domination cannot be measured on a single index of relative means (Lovett, 2010: 71). However, one might disaggregate the effects of land reform on specific components of domination by major landlords qua landowners, employers, lenders, traders, or politicians. Large landowners exert interlocking market power over things that the local poor can neither live without nor, in many cases, readily get elsewhere. It can be hypothesized that well-conducted land reform would ease some of these constraints, especially if it is carried out through peasant mobilisation for reform, as in the Philippines (Borras et al., 2007) and in West Bengal, India (Bardhan and Mookherjee, 2006).

Much of the evidence that LRS reduces poverty/inequality and inequality of opportunity also supports the second objective of the liberty-enhancing state (Section 2.2.3). Directly, through access to food formerly grown by landowners, or indirectly, through increased income, land reform can facilitate the exercise of self-determination by securing individuals' access to valuable options.

4. Alternatives to land reform

Are there alternatives to LRS (a) to redistribute farmland to poor households; (b) without distribution, to reduce rural poverty, inequality of outcome and opportunity, and "liberty-impeding" domination; (c) thus or otherwise, to advance some main normative demands of food ethics? Are such alternatives more feasible, cost-effective, or ethically consensual (Section 5) than classical land reform?

4.1. Land redistribution without state-led classic land reform?

4.1.1. Ethics-based movements

Occasionally, ethics-based movements induce the rich to make significant transfers to the poor, as with Indian reformist Vinoba Bhave's land-grant Bhoodan movement in the 1950s, and Brazil's Movimento dos Trabalhadores Sem Terra. These are rare, and their impacts on total land distribution limited (Caldwell and Shrader-Frechette, 1993).

4.1.2. Direct action by the poor

The poor can remedy land inequality through direct action, ignoring, bypassing, or overthrowing the state. Given the dire consequences of land invasions, revolution, or civil war (including class war), few would *prefer* this to land reform by legislative process through a legitimate state.

4.1.3. State tax incentives to LRS

Tax incentives to private land-grants have a modest place, but come at the cost of other state (and charity) actions (Eastwood et al., 2009). Taxes, preferably progressive, on land ownership are attractive intellectually, but antagonise the same powerful landowners as does land reform, without enthusing its potential beneficiaries.

4.1.4. Tenancy and tenancy reform

Widespread farmland tenancy in Asia and Latin America offers two opportunities for non-confiscatory pro-poor state action on land. First, public and customary land law, registration, or dispute settlement can be changed to induce tenancy. Second, if very unequal land *ownership* biases contracts, notably sharecropping, against tenants, tenancy can be regulated to favour them.

Even with land ownership in large units, can some of the benefits for output, employment, and poverty reduction associated with smaller operated farms in low-income labour-surplus developing countries, be achieved by tenancy? Normally tenancy transfers land and income from its management to poorer people. Second, by making farms smaller, tenancy increases employment (and labour income) per hectare (Hazell and Rahman, 2014). Third, tenancy can combine small farmers' on-farm advantages and off-farm scale economies in processing and marketing: landlords can find it pays to sell marketing, credit, and other services to tenants.

Yet in many places tenancy is unusual and/or highly controversial. It often involves one or a few big landlords with local monopoly power over many small tenants, often in other markets too: labour, credit, farm inputs (Hazell and Rahman, 2014). This can conflict with the goal of increasing liberty as non-domination. Tenants also often have little security, and therefore few inducements to invest or conserve resources. Yet, even if land ownership is very unequal and land redistribution infeasible, tenancy normally equalises farmland and shifts it into smaller holdings, tending to reduce poverty, inequality and domination, and (in low-income countries) to raise farm output. This argues against *preventing* tenancy. Even *regulating* tenancy in favour of poor tenants – by restraining rents or crop-shares, compelling longer leases, or impeding evictions – encourages landowners to evade regulation by tacit evictions, and resume personal cultivation of the land (Eastwood et al., 2009; Lipton, 2009:153-8; Riedinger, 1993:26), thus making farms on balance larger and more unequal. This defeats the aim of such legislation to increase control of land by small farmers and the poor.

Tenancy reform and regulation are less at risk of being counter-productive if complemented by LRS (with ownership ceilings) enforceable by a legitimate state, as in Japan, Taiwan, and South Korea in 1945–1963. Nevertheless, reliance on tenancy alone, even if successfully reformed to reduce inequality of farm size, faces difficulties. Though tenancy normally shifts farming from big to small units, the contributions to poverty reduction are modest. With land owned by

self-operating large farmers, the poor get only the product of their labour. With such land rented to poorer tenants, these also get income from farm enterprise. However, the income from land remains with the owner. Also, to share the risk of farming, tenants and landlords in low-income environments usually settle on sharecropping contracts. Evidence suggests that efficiency losses are small, but in return for bearing risk, the landlord appropriates part of the tenant's income (Bell, 1990). Tenants locked into such situations can be even poorer than landless labourers (Deininger et al., 2012).

4.2. Poverty reduction, equality, liberty without land redistribution?

4.2.1. Religious and charitable bodies

These have historically dominated private efforts to reduce poverty, but usually concentrate benefits on the devout and accessible. They rarely seek to redress *land* inequality, in many developing countries the main source of inequality. Indeed, religious foundations have been among the largest landowners and have actively contributed to land inequality.

4.2.2. Progressivity: taxes and public outlays

Where formal activity and employment prevail, the main constraints on inequality and poverty are progressive tax, public spending on health and education, pensions, and benefits ("welfare payments"). This formula has not prevented an explosion of within-country inequality in 1980–2014 (Piketty, 2014); is threatened by ageing populations and tax-dodging; is less relevant to the usually smaller and weaker states of low-income, substantially informal developing countries; and does little to redress the underlying source of their inequalities of status and power: ownership of farmland.

4.2.3. Anti-poverty specifics

India's National Rural Employment Programme guarantees a set number of days of work at a (low) wage-rate. Rural credit and education, focused on poor women, are provided in Bangladesh by a unique mix of NGO and public action (Greeley, 1982). But such schemes seldom reach the very poorest, and rely for support on power-structures not too dominated by those with assured, ascribed affluence. Very unequal land thus threatens such schemes, rendering them complements to land reform, not substitutes. That applies even more strongly to measures aiming, without land reform and with farmland very unequal, to increase the status or liberty of the rural poor, especially women or tribals among them.

4.2.4. Agro-technical progress

Investment in agricultural R and D — especially if targeted towards small farms and therefore employment-intensive - has large, proven successes in reducing poverty, and within-region (though not inter-regional) inequality (Hazell et al., 2000; Kerr and Kohlavalli, 1999; Lipton and Longhurst, 2009; Thirtle et al., 2003; Diao et al., 2010). In particular, the cereals-based Green Revolution cheapened staple food, stabilised its availability, and raised demand for rural farm and non-farm labour (Hazell and Ramasamy, 1991) – all tending to reduce poverty and rural domination and increase liberty. However, agro-technical progress did less, if anything, towards these goals where land was heavily concentrated into large capital-intensive large farms, as in South Africa (Abler et al., 2007) and parts of Latin America (de Janvry and Sadoulet, 2000, 2002). In such cases, land redistribution is needed for agricultural research to have the desired impact.

4.3. Nutrition security without wider ethical aims?

Can nutritional quantity, quality, or security be improved without addressing poverty, inequality, or lack of liberty, whether or not by land reform? Of course, famine relief, and longer-term arrangements to improve child nutritional status through better food, cleaner water, and sanitation, have often worked well (UN, 2014; WHO, 2014). However, durable backing from the polity for such arrangements is never safe if their beneficiaries lack any political influence, as do the landless in agriculture-based areas.

To summarise: in such areas, states and societies have ways to give the poor some land rights without land reform; or some social advance without land claims; or some nutritional gains without social advance. But all these ways are fragile, and are complements to land reform rather than alternatives.

5. A principled objection against land reform

The classic argument for LRS is via claimed *consequences*: equal opportunity (EO), less poverty, less inequality, and more liberty. A fundamental rights-based objection is that landowners have historical and hence moral legitimacy (hereafter "legitimate incumbency", LI). In this section we focus on the conflict between LI and EO, although the same conflicts exist between LI and the other goals pursued by defenders of LRS—a similar approach could be adopted to ease those conflicts. First, we show that the morality of specific land reforms can be assessed despite LI-based objections to LRS. Second, we argue against the view that taking into account LI leads to replacing redistributive land reform with restitutive land reform.

5.1. EO versus LI

Mill ([1848] 2008: 40–41) made an EO-based justice case for *land* redistribution only: "Land … is the original inheritance of the whole species … It is no hardship …to be excluded from what others have produced [i.e., with capital and labour alone, or income from them: ML-YS] … But it is some hardship to be born and to find all nature's gifts [land] previously engrossed, and no place left for the newcomer".

However, justice is not only about equality, exclusion, or equity, but also legitimacy and "rights" as a whole. For the state to expel people from "their legitimate" land seems arbitrary—even were it not open to dishonesty and terrible abuse, including "ethnic cleansing". Hence most people agree that LI matters too: that some property rights are historically legitimate, and that, for moral as well as economic reasons, property distribution should not be so disrupted as to cause major, avoidable harm to property right holders. In practice, honouring LI means that incumbents can peacefully exercise and legally enforce legitimately acquired rights to property. Only then can incumbents, including landowners, meet legitimate expectations, and fulfil contracts. Otherwise, the risks of business are such that investment and food production will decline and may seize up, with costs to everyone, including the poor.

But why is any incumbent's claim, even if historically founded, "legitimate"? Land reform, sometimes by mandated democratic governments, has often violated expectations that any claim to own and inherit land, once accepted in law, shall not be abrogated by state *fiat*. Yet LI claims remain widespread and durable. Based on them, owners make contracts, often with labourers, traders, or poor relations. These, not just landowners, lose if those contracts must be broken due to a land reform. Yet EO, or at least absence of grossly un*equal* opportunity due to ascription, seems as central to justice (and long-term economic efficiency) as LI.

5.2. Incommensurability

If so, standard approaches to ethical debates on LRS fail to ease the tensions between conflicting views about its moral foundations. For some extreme libertarians, LI almost always trumps EO; the reverse is true of some enthusiasts for purposive state action. In practice, no state—and no land policy—*wholly* driven by LI to the neglect of EO, or the reverse, could subsist, let alone be just and efficient.

Can we ask whether land reform is justified or unjustified without denying the claims of EO or LI? We might ask whether a just and efficient state should prioritise, or even maximise, some *weighted sum* of LI and EO. This approach is attractive to consequentialists (especially Utilitarians), but faces many challenges because weights differ (and change) among groups according to moral stance, self-interest, and perception of power.

5.3. Assessing specific land reforms despite incommensurability

More fundamentally, any rigid weighting of LI and EO seems problematic because these moral norms seem "incommensurable" (Berlin, 1969; Chang, 2013). Some conclude that, absent a common currency to which values could be converted, they cannot be compared at all. This formulation claims that *incommensurable* goods, values, or norms are *non-comparable*. But that "some values and goods can't be compared or ranked in terms of one master-value or formula, [does not entail they] can't be compared or deliberated between at all" (Cherniss and Hardy, 2013). Indeed, they can be compared, but only on a case-by-case basis, without any overarching rank-ordering of EO and LI, or weighing based on assigning them a *fixed* value converted in a common currency (e.g., utility, ability to pay). For context-sensitive moral deliberation to be theoretically justified, rather than mere ad hoc situationism, one must identify guiding moral *norms for evaluating* cases. A variety of approaches can be used to reach this goal, but we do not here discuss whether they would all yield congruent conclusions. Instead, we will adopt one approach frequently used in practical ethics, namely, specifying and balancing relevant moral considerations without assigning them a fixed value (Baier, 1958; Richardson, 1990; Arras and Brody, 2013; Beauchamp and Childress, 2013). The outcome of deliberation should provide guidance as to the permissibility and desirability of *particular proposed LRS* policies. If such norms are well specified, all but "extremist" LI-libertarians or radical egalitarians can argue usefully (i.e., reduce their disagreements) about any particular land reform.

Assuming LI and EO are incommensurable but both desirable, how should we specify LI and EO norms to promote a constructive debate between proponents of LI and EO?

First, LI and EO each has diminishing returns: the more a society or individual has of one, and the less of the other, the stronger is the moral urgency (and felt need) for the "deprived" desideratum and the less for the "ample" one. Great inequality of outcome and opportunity, alongside pervasive, enforced LI, strengthen the case for land reform; the reverse weakens it.

Second, some societies feature widespread respect for LI, but little for EO: the case for land reform is weaker here, and stronger where the reverse preferences prevail.

Third, the greater the dependence on farmland for income and advancement, and the fewer the opportunities elsewhere, the more land inequality harms the landless and near-landless—but also the more LRS diminishes expectations of legitimate incumbents. These points and others are summarised in Table 1.

One reason for favouring such an approach is that it reflects non-violent political practice potentially surrounding land reform, rather than requiring citizens or governments to make a mutually exclusive choice between EO and LI.

5.4. Implications for restitutive vs. redistributive reform

The focus of many current land reform proposals and actions in Southern Africa and Latin America—apart from or instead of the usual moral goals of LRS (Section 2)—is *restitution*, i.e., reversing farmland seizures by particular colonising or ethnic groups. Which is better ethics and/or economics: restitution or LRS? They get farmland—and hence poverty reduction, non-domination and food access—to different (though overlapping) groups of people. The LI-EO debates, and guiding norms for settling them, help here too.

The argument for restitution reverses the usual normative import of LI. LI is the large landowners' shield against LRS—yet also the spear of restitutive land reform, seeking to restore land to owners wrongfully evicted. LI of past owners, if genuine, implies restitution; LI of present owners, it is widely agreed, requires compensation and/or a Statute of Limitations, constitutionally embedded to avoid arbitrariness.

In practice, post-colonial land restitution usually redistributes land claims from descendants of colonisers or dominant ethnic groups (or wealthy persons who colluded with and bought from them) to members of indigenous or majority ethnic groups. But, even if this purports to address current poverty and inequality, it frequently induces land transfers not to poorer people as a whole, but to rich and politically well connected persons in the majority, and now dominant, ethnic group. Such land transfers may well address a justified historic sense of grievance against outgoing elites, but, by favouring incoming elites, they do not redress current inequalities. Historically recent land transfers, if ethnically or colonially inspired, should and will be redressed by post-colonial regimes; but where land losers and gainers are historically remote, redistribution is better than restitution at remedying EO, and no worse at respecting LI. Hence, except for "recent" historic injustices (e.g., recent land transfers under ethnic laws), it is better to implement LRS for current redistribution than to restitute land to former owners, with probably little impact on EO and thus food security.

6. Conclusion

In this paper, we first reviewed the history and consequences of land distribution and redistribution. Directly or by detour, LRS now affects two billion people. We conclude that LRS (but emphatically not collectivization) in low-income and most middle-income countries with very unequal land control has reduced food insecurity, poverty and inequality, enhanced equality of opportunity and liberty for farmers,

Table 1
Specification of LI considerations.

Moral case for LI is weakened to the extent that current land rights are:	**LI is less violated to the extent that:**
• Very unequal	• Land losers receive adequate compensation
• Leading to extreme inequality of assets, income and opportunity	• Their alternatives to reform offer few opportunities
• Inherited	• Their alternatives *after* reform are reasonable
• Originating in force, fraud, or bribery	• Horizontal equity is respected, e.g., rural landowners are treated no worse than equally rich urban high-income landlords, nor poor labourers than similarly poor farmers
• Due to colonisation, especially if colonisers failed to spread non-land opportunity	• Land losers or their parents acquired land illegitimately, especially if recently
• Derived from land, rather than improvements or "earned" income	

and increased social efficiency. Towards such goals, land reform is one of several strategies — notably, increasing sustainable agricultural production — but it complements them, and offers major leverage for addressing food insecurity in developing countries with still, or again, very unequal farmland.

Second, we asked whether (and when) LRS is morally defensible. We answered by clarifying and justifying its main moral goals and exploring whether its consequentialist justifications are overridden by rights-based arguments based on incumbent legitimacy. No fixed weighting procedure or other algorithm can resolve such uncertainties of moral deliberation, but we suggest that contextually specified guiding moral norms enable supporters and opponents to narrow their differences regarding any particular land reform. If successful, we have shed some new light on the relationship between farmland-access ethics and food ethics in connection to the broader food security and development debate.

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