

AGRARIAN REFORM FOR CONTEMPORARY TIMES

Redistribution, Restitution, Recognition and Regulation as the
Four Pillars of an Integral Reform



LA VIA CAMPESINA'S BRIEFING NOTE
SECOND INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON AGRARIAN REFORM AND RURAL
DEVELOPMENT (ICARRD+20)
FEBRUARY 2025

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Photo Credit: Tineke D'haese

THE CONTEXT

Across the world, debates on land, water, territories and agrarian reform are shaped by historical experiences, contemporary struggles, and divergent sociopolitical economies. In Africa, Asia, Latin America, Caribbean, the Arab region including Palestine, and across Europe and North America, movements for food sovereignty face both old and newly intensified pressures on land, waters and territories. The **imprint of colonial conquest and imperial expansion** continues to define forms of control, access, and ownership. Meanwhile today's capitalist demands for minerals, energy, carbon markets, industrial agriculture and geo-political wars and spheres of influence are creating a renewed and accelerating wave of dispossession.

Palestine – even before it became the site of a brutal genocidal war – stood as one of the most explicit and ongoing examples of settler colonialism, where land and water are systematically appropriated through military, legal and infrastructural means, with absolute impunity. The Israeli occupation – enabled by the imperial powers – imposes a regime of territorial fragmentation, settlement expansion, land expropriation, water apartheid and the destruction of agriculture and fisheries. Palestinian farmers are denied access to their own lands, while water resources are transferred to settlements and controlled through a complex matrix of military orders, permits and surveillance.

Agrarian reform in Palestine – therefore – cannot be understood as apart from the political struggle against occupation. While Palestine stands as the locus of struggles for land, water and territories – **these patterns of dispossession repeats across continents and regions.**

Unchecked state power, granting fiscal and territorial concessions to private interests, has facilitated the concentration of fertile land, forests, and water resources in the hands of corporations and foreign investors, undermining the livelihoods and rights of peasants, Indigenous Peoples, pastoral communities, and fishing communities. **Financialization of nature**, the process by which global finance “puts a pricetag” on land and ecosystems, turns natural territories into speculative assets and enables massive investment by pension funds, banks and asset managers—leading to dispossession, environmental destruction and commodification of the commons.

The **market-linked reforms** actively promoted by institutions like the World Bank reinforce a model of individual private property, which leads to the dispossession of small farmers, Afro-Descendant peoples and Indigenous Peoples, and to the development of export-oriented monoculture, mega-infrastructure projects, industrial agriculture, and special economic zones. It reinforces inequalities, undermines communal and customary tenure systems, weakens food sovereignty, and en-trenches patriarchal, caste-based, and racialized hierarchies in access to land, water, and territories.

The **“willing-buyer, willing-seller” approach** of the World Bank treats land as a commodity rather than a historical right. This model prioritizes individual title deeds, undermining communal and Indigenous systems, particularly affecting women and marginalized groups, and channels land, water and territories into commercial agribusiness, further promoting export-oriented production instead of supporting food sovereignty.

Often, **the myth of “unused” land, or “Terra Nullius”** justifies such dispossession – despite the fact that much of the so-called vacant land supports grazing, shifting cultivation, foraging, and cultural practices. Across regions, evidence shows that market-led reforms erode food sovereignty, rarely improve livelihoods and often legitimize unequal structures of control on access and ownership.

Corporate-led renewable energy expansion adds a parallel layer. Vast greenfield solar and wind farms – on land and water, the “green hydrogen” zones, mining for minerals used in batteries and carbon-offset plantations are marketed as climate solutions. Such green-washing efforts obscure the dispossession these projects cause, allowing states and corporations to frame these blatant forms of grabs as “sustainable development”.

To top all this – **wars, conflicts, and geopolitical competition and rising militarization** are driving a new wave of land, water and forest grabbing across the world. Governments invoke “national security,” “energy security,” and “technological sovereignty” to justify converting vast territories into military bases, missile-testing zones, space launch sites and fortified border zones. The global race for energy – and water-intensive infrastructure—AI data centers, semi-conductor facilities, nuclear plants, mega-dams, ports, logistics corridors and strategic mineral extraction—demands enormous territorial footprints.

All of these factors are driving peasants and Indigenous Peoples out of rural areas in massive numbers. Youth who have grown up in this neoliberal era watching small farms disappear are migrating to seek opportunities in cities. Peasants who have been dispossessed of their agrarian livelihoods are forced to embark on long, often dangerous journeys for a chance at economic stability. Those who remain face crumbling infrastructure, a lack of services and public transportation, and heightened social isolation. **De-ruralization** has been a conscious choice on the part of policymakers and corporate giants without the consent of rural people: capitalism and colonialism have violently created the conditions for such dispossession.

As countries compete for power and strategic and economic advantage, environmental safeguards and community rights are sidelined – and those who organize to defend these rights are criminalized and persecuted by the State and its institutional mechanisms. **The result is a pervasive pattern of land concentra-tion**, financialization

of nature, dispossession, and social inequality across the globe. This dispossession has taken a distinct but equally devastating form. Rather than classic land grabbing, agrarian restructuring, market liberalization and counter-reforms have led to the systematic elimination of small and medium-scale farms. This process has **undermined the social function of small farmers, whose primary role is to feed the population**, and has **accelerated rural depopulation and land abandonment**.

As peasant farmers are pushed out of agriculture, agrarian policies increasingly rely on precarious migrant labor to sustain the primary sector, while local farming knowledge, food sovereignty and rural livelihoods are steadily eroded. At the same time, **inadequate social protections and retirement mechanisms for aging farmers block generational renewal**, preventing young people from accessing land and sustaining farming as a viable livelihood. These dynamics **disproportionately affect women, youth and gender-and-sexually-diverse people**, who are already more vulnerable to landlessness and exclusion. Clearly, there is an urgent need to support small farmers, guarantees dignified retirement, enables inter-generational land transfer, and affirms food production as a public and social responsibility rather than a market-driven function.

Effective agrarian reform must address these intersecting threats by protecting communal tenure, restoring historical justice, ensuring equitable access for women and marginalized groups, strengthening local governance, promoting food sovereignty and democratic control over territories.



Photo Source: La Via Campesina Archives

AGRARIAN REFORM FOR CONTEMPORARY TIMES:

**LA VIA CAMPESINA'S
PROPOSITION**



Photo Credit: Ivanovich de la Luna

R ESTITUTION. EDISTRIBUTION. ECOGNITION. EGULATION.

4Rs

In this evolving global landscape, the vision articulated by La Via Campesina emphasizes the need for agrarian reform **that is not fragmented or technocratic, but rather political and integral**, recognizing the diverse realities around the world and placing the control over land, water and territories in the hands of those who work, guard and steward it. **Our vision is grounded in four mutually reinforcing axes: restitu-tion, redistribution, recognition and regulation (4Rs).**



Photo Source: La Via Campesina Palestine

RESTITUTION.



Redress historical injustices, including the restoration of cultural continuity and territorial sovereignty for peoples whose lands, rivers and oceans were taken through conquest, colonial settlement, racialized law and contemporary forms of dispossession.

Around the world, land-back movements demand **reparations for stolen territories and the return of ancestral lands** unlawfully seized by states, corporations and settlers. These demands are grounded not only in economic loss but in cultural, spiritual and ecological relationships that cannot be replaced.

Restitution also **addresses the insidious legal mechanisms through which Indigenous Peoples and forest-dependent peoples continue to be dispossessed today**. Forest Acts, conservation zones, wildlife corridors, carbon-offset projects and “eco-tourism” regimes are frequently used to criminalize traditional livelihoods, deny customary access and expel peasants and Indigenous Peoples under the guise of environmental protection. In many places, these same laws convert Indigenous territories into state-controlled reserves or private investment zones, severing people from the forests, rivers and sacred sites that sustain their identity and knowledge systems.

This dispossession is further enforced through the **criminalization, persecution and violence** directed at peasants, Indigenous Peoples and other land and territory defenders, who are harassed, imprisoned and killed for protecting their lands. These practices constitute an ongoing form of dispossession and **demand international political recognition, accountability, and protection mechanisms** grounded in international human rights law, including the UN Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas.

For La Via Campesina, restitution must therefore encompass the return of lands taken by settler colonialism, the restoration of governance over forests and waters alienated through statutory law, and the protection of territories holding cultural, spiritual and ceremonial significance.

It is not simply about reversing past harms but about dismantling the ongoing structures that continue to reproduce dispossession. It is about restoring justice for those who were criminalized and persecuted for defending their territories.

Restitution must also be understood as a comprehensive vision of territory that includes soil, subsoil and air; waters, seas and rivers; and the living ecosystems that sustain life. This vision reflects peasant and Indigenous worldviews in which territory is not a commodity or merchandise, but a living space of collective existence, responsibility and intergenerational continuity.

We want that peasants and Indigenous and oppressed peoples regain their rightful authority to guard and govern their territories according to their own laws, cosmologies and collective visions for the future.

REDISTRIBUTION.



It must be understood not merely as transferring land from large owners to landless communities, but as transforming the very purpose and model of land use itself. La Via Campesina has always emphasized that **it is neither desirable nor sustainable to redistribute land only for it to be reintegrated into the same agribusiness logic** of chemical-intensive farming, monoculture, contract farming, or extractive value chains that exhaust soils, concentrate markets and reproduce inequality.

Redistribution must **advance toward the democratization of territories**, confronting and eliminating large concentrations of territories in the hands of financial capital, extractive industries and agribusiness, and guaranteeing them as a commons rather than a speculative or market asset.

Instead, redistributed territories must counter the patriarchal and capitalist logic and become the foundation for peasant agroecology, cooperative structures, peasant seed systems, equitable access to water, and sustainable credit facilities that liberate producers from predatory debt and market dependency.

It must also confront the structural exclusion of women, gender and sexually diverse peoples, youth, Indigenous Peoples and migrant agricultural workers from land control, use and decision-making. In many regions, including Europe, agrarian restructuring has produced a dual system in which aging farmers are unable to retire with dignity, young people are blocked from accessing land, and migrant workers are confined to precarious, landless labor.



Photo Source:
La Via Campesina Archives

An integral redistribution agenda must therefore be linked to public policies that **guarantee generational renewal, including retirement and social security mechanisms** for older farmers, secure access to land and resources for youth, and pathways for migrant workers to move out of permanent exploitation and into collective forms of land use and stewardship.

Redistributed land must not reproduce patriarchal or exclusionary relations. It must explicitly prioritize women, gender-and-sexually-diverse people, youth, Indigenous Peoples and other historically marginalized groups (*discriminated on the basis of race, caste, descent, gender and ethnicity*), ensuring equal rights to land, water, credit, training and decision-making within collective and cooperative structures. Only by transforming both ownership and social relations can redistribution prevent reconcentration and sustain food-producing communities over time. The exclusionary practices prevalent in our societies also take specific and violent forms against gender-and-sexually-diverse people, who face discrimination, territorial expulsion, criminalization and, in many contexts, targeted violence and murder based on identity and sexual orientation. Redistribution must therefore **recognize diversity not as a secondary concern, but as a central subject of agrarian reform and democratization.**

Another aspect is that the concentration of rural and urban land follows the same speculative logic, driven by finance, real estate interests and extractive accumulation.

Agrarian reform must therefore be understood as **a comprehensive social and political project that links countryside and city**, addresses access to, and control over **land and housing as interconnected struggles**, and reclaims land from speculation in all its forms.

Without this clarity, redistributed lands remain vulnerable to reconcentration through indebtedness, land speculation or state-driven industrial policies that once again dispossess rural people and the urban working class.

For La Via Campesina, true redistribution therefore reimagines territories as commons—not a commodity—ensuring that agrarian reform deepens democracy, equity and social justice. And that it strengthens food sovereignty and protects territories against the recurring threats of privatization.



Photo Source: La Via Campesina Archives

RECOGNITION.

As La Via Campesina, we affirm that land, water and territories cannot be reduced to private, individual commodities, but are embedded in collective histories, relationships and systems of governance that predate and often contradict colonial, patriarchal and capitalist logic.

Across the world, the privatization of land—through titling programs, market-driven reforms and financial speculation—has redefined land as an asset to be owned, traded and leveraged rather than a shared foundation of life. We must challenge this logic **by acknowledging the legitimacy of communal, customary and Indigenous Peoples land systems, including pastoral territories, forest commons, riverine spaces, collective farms and sacred landscapes.**

This recognition **must also explicitly include native and creole seeds** as an inseparable part of territories and food systems. Without seeds there is no food sovereignty. Community-managed seed systems are the living heritage of peoples, sustained through collective knowledge, care and intergenerational transmission. It affirms that all **members of the community hold inherent rights to govern, use and protect their territories according to their own laws, norms and cultural protocols, and that these rights do not depend on state-issued titles or market validation – and that these norms, laws and protocols are also in line with principles of equitable access to all.**

Commons such as water, forests, seas, seeds, biodiversity and air are not safeguarded by a single sector or authority, but are collectively cared for by peasants, Indigenous Peoples, fishing communities and rural communities as a whole, whose daily practices sustain life and ecological balance.

It means **validating diverse forms of tenure**— shared grazing systems, rotational agriculture, ancestral domains, fisheries commons—that have sustained ecological balance and social cohesion for generations.

It affirms the **sovereignty of peoples** whose knowledge, cosmologies and governance systems have been systematically marginalized, and ensures that their authority over land and water is upheld alongside or beyond state law.

Recognition must also deepen the understanding of **agrarian reform as a defense of the planet**. Agrarian reform cools the planet by protecting soils, water cycles, biodiversity and ecosystems, including in territories falsely labeled as “empty.” Rooted in peasant agroecology, it restores ecological functions, strengthens food sovereignty and affirms the rights of nature as central to collective survival.

It must **uphold the feminist values, and provide equal access to** women, gender and sexual diversities, Indigenous Peoples and other historically oppressed social groups. By grounding land rights in **collective identity and history** rather than commodification, recognition becomes a cornerstone of territorial protection, dignity, cultural survival.



REGULATION.



The rules, limits and obligations that govern how land, water and territories are owned, accessed, transferred and used determines whether these spaces serve the public good or are subordinated to private and state power. It requires **clear and enforceable frameworks that prevent excessive concentration of landownership, curb speculative or predatory acquisitions, and ensure transparent, democratic processes about who controls the land, how it is being used, especially when land is allocated or converted.**

Regulation must also confront **emerging forms of dispossession driven by technological and energy infrastructures, including artificial intelligence systems**, data centers and digital platforms, whose massive land, water and energy demands are reshaping territories in the interests of capital. These technologies must be subject to democratic regulation and integrated into territorial governance so that they serve peoples and communities, rather than accelerating extraction, enclosure and inequality.

Regulation **must clearly distinguish between access, control and ownership of land, water and territories**. Across regions, so-called land banks, leasing schemes and concessionary arrangements often provide temporary access to land while retaining control in the hands of states, corporations or financial institutions. Such arrangements undermine peasant autonomy, and reproduce dependency, even where formal “tenure reform” is claimed.

For La Via Campesina, regulation must ensure that those who work the land exercise effective control and decision-making power over its use, governance and future, whether through collective ownership, customary systems or other non-commodified forms.

Therefore, by calling for regulation, La Via Campesina affirms that the governance and control of land, water and territories must uphold constitutional guarantees of equality, participation and prioritize the rights and livelihoods of the communities who inhabit, work upon and guard these territories. Any form of acquisition affecting Indigenous Peoples' lands, waters, or territories must respect the right to free, prior, and informed consent (FPIC). Other rural communities, including peasants, pastoralists, fishers and workers, have the right to meaningful participation, consultation and collective decision-making in accordance with their respective rights frameworks [JM1.1][JM2.1]. This must explicitly include the strict regulation of seas, coasts, rivers and air, which are increasingly appropriated through extractive projects, false solutions to the energy transition, militarization and geopolitical interests that deepen dispossession and ecological destruction.

In many regions, unregulated land markets, opaque concessions and militarized zoning have enabled vast transfers of land from rural peoples to corporations and state agencies, often without due process or meaningful participation.

Effective regulation counters this by establishing clear legislation and limits on who can own land and how much, setting environmental and social criteria for land use, creating transparency and accountability mechanisms to monitor the use of land, safeguarding community access to water and commons, and ensuring that public land is not quietly privatized or repurposed for extractive or geo-political agendas.

Such regulatory frameworks for land, water, and territories should be guided by international instruments that recognize collective, customary, and Indigenous rights.

The UN Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas (**UNDROP**) affirms the rights of communities to land, resources, and participation in decision-making (**Article 10**). The UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (**UNDRIP**) underscores free, prior, and informed consent (**FPIC**) and self-determination over traditional territories.

The **FAO's Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure** (VGGT) provide practical principles for secure access, equitable distribution, and democratic management. Together, these frameworks offer a foundation for policies that respect historical rights, protect marginalized groups, and promote food sovereignty.

As pressures on land water and territories intensify under climate change, resource extraction and global competition, the need for a shared global understanding of how territories should be governed becomes urgent. Protecting them as a social and ecological good, ensuring that all people have equitable access to the territories they need for life, culture and livelihood – must be central to the regulation agenda.



Photo Credit: Julio González

GLOBALIZE THE STRUGGLE, GLOBALIZE HOPE!

INTEGRAL AND POPULAR AGRARIAN REFORM, NOW!

Integral and Popular Agrarian Reform for our times must be understood as a transformative, ongoing and global political process, one that concerns the Global South and the Global North alike. Agrarian reform is not only a response to contemporary land grabbing but also to historical processes of colonization, enclosure and rural displacement that expelled peasants from their territories and fueled settler colonial expansion across the world. **All regions must therefore undergo agrarian reform** to restore land to its social, ecological and food-producing functions.

At its core, **agrarian reform must** protect land, water and territories from artificialization, mega-infrastructure, extractivism and speculative development. **Land must primarily serve** to produce food, nourish peoples and sustain rural life, rather than feed financial markets, geopolitical ambitions or corporate profit.

Defending land for agroecological food production is inseparable from defending the right of peoples to remain on their territories, and from addressing the forced migration that results when rural livelihoods are destroyed.

Integral agrarian reform **must place generational justice at its center**. This requires guaranteeing access to land and resources for young people, while ensuring dignified social protections, including pensions and retirement mechanisms, for older farmers so that generational renewal becomes possible. These processes **must explicitly confront gender inequality** by securing equal and autonomous rights for women, gender- and sexually-diverse people and historically oppressed groups in access to land, decision-making and control over territories.

There is no single model for rights, access, control and ownership of land, water and territories. Agrarian reform **must recognize and protect diverse systems**, including small-scale private plots, communal and customary lands, Indigenous Peoples' territories, forest commons, fisheries and shared public lands. In all cases, the central principle remains the same: peoples must collectively control the processes through which land is accessed, produced, governed and transmitted across generations, free from corporate, financial and state domination.

This vision is grounded in internationally recognized rights.

The UN Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas (**UNDROP**) and the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (**UNDRIP**) must be **central pillars of agrarian reform**, guiding states to protect collective rights, ensure participation, uphold free, prior and informed consent, and defend territories against dispossession. Agrarian reform must also **move beyond a utilitarian view** of land and recognizing that territories sustain all forms of life, not only human economies.

To advance this vision, **agrarian reform must remain a priority agenda within international and multilateral institutions**. We call on states and intergovernmental bodies, including those of the Global North, to take concrete responsibility for implementing integral agrarian reform.

In particular, **we insist that the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and the Committee on World Food Security (CFS) establish strong, participatory and regular assessment mechanisms** to monitor the implementation of the Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure (**VGGT**). These assessments must **generate binding political pressure at national levels** to advance the 4R framework and to place the control of land, water and territories in the hands of the peoples who live on, work, protect and care for them.

In the face of deepening inequality, ecological collapse and authoritarian control over land and food systems, **Integral and Popular Agrarian Reform represents both a necessity and a horizon of hope—rooted in food sovereignty, agroecology, feminist values, ecological justice and democratic control over territories.**

Globalize the struggle! Globalize hope!





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