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*Poverty in Honduras cannot be separated from the land, because communal traditions are tied to the land and its productivity. As communal land becomes privatized, those traditions are breaking down, leading to urbanization, unemployment, and passivity, which takes the form of waiting for remittances from Hondurans working in the US. Corruption is becoming more rampant, as government takes over land and treats it as the private domain of officials. Better land titling might help to some extent, but a far more effective solution to the misuse of land in Honduras would be a tax on land values that would encourage productive use and discourage speculative holding of land.*



## Conditions in Honduras

In Honduras, there is economic development, but the majority of people live in absolute poverty. People in the street are digging in the garbage, looking for food.

I am a member of the Garífuna, a mixture of West African with Caribs and Arawaks. We have our own language, tradition, religion. We have lived on the north coast of Honduras for more than 200 years. By arrangement of the British Crown, they were established in 1797 with access to land and sea, so they had everything they needed to fulfill basic needs. They lived without poverty or malnutrition. Communities and villages developed around a common area. They have respect for the traditions of the elders, who were the main guides. Fifty years ago, the Garífuna started to migrate to the United States, and that has increased in the last 20 years. That had a great impact on our development.

*Campesinos* are another rural group in Honduras. They are a mixture of Spanish and indigenous people. They face evictions, because landowners are

taking over their land for resource development or to grow monoculture crops. That is forcing *campesinos* to work in factories or sweat shops.

Since 1998, when Hurricane Mitch hit Honduras, the main factor in economic development has been remittances from Hondurans in the US. There is almost no production in Honduras except for some sweatshops. In my home city, the port of *La Selva*, the major livelihood is tourism. High unemployment is leading youngsters into uncontrolled gang activity. That is the result of growing inequality in Honduras.

### **Losing Traditions, Deteriorating Society**

The rise of poverty and inequality in Honduras has historic roots. When the Garífuna people migrated to the United States, they abandoned their land, which had communal titles. None was held privately. A person would work some land and then move on and allow it to rest, giving it time for restoration. The government realized that the people of this community were not really using their land, so it could be repossessed. Also, since Hurricane Mitch, the government has sold Garífuna beaches to private developers.

All of these changes are causing the Garífuna to abandon their traditions, including the consensus of having guidance from their elders, who no longer work for the people. The elders are seeking personal profit. They have installed NGOs who claim to represent the community, but they actually get aid from other countries and do nothing to improve the lives of people.

We never had malnourishment before, but that has started. When roads and highways flood, communities are isolated. Teachers do not want to teach in rural areas. Those who do have difficulty finding teaching materials. Honduras has a very high and growing rate of HIV and AIDS. Every issue is connected to land, to the loss of livelihood. There is no substitute for a direct connection to land. The only option left is to emigrate.

The same thing is happening to the other part of the population, the poor *campesinos*. With no access to financing, they also move. Even if they have land, they cannot produce. They have problems with weather and with access to the market. So they see the US as the solution.

Free trade agreements have hurt the people of Honduras because 75 percent of Honduran production is agricultural. Agricultural products that could be produced in Honduras are more expensive in the market than imports. So people buy the imported food. The poor producers from Honduras are left outside the system because there is no market for their products. We are not an industrialized country. So what can we trade?

## WHY GLOBAL POVERTY?

The free trade agreements also include provisions that allow biological information to be copyrighted. They are generally biased in favor of the US against small-scale farmers in Honduras. The agreements allow factories to pay workers 30 to 35 cents per piece. That is not fair compensation, since the final products, such as Levis jeans and clothing for the Gap, are being sold for \$20 to \$25. Working conditions are poor, and employees are hired on a temporary basis to avoid paying health insurance. With a low income, workers cannot pay for education or for quality nourishment or housing. It is really hard for them.

If big, beautiful houses appear in villages, the money is likely coming from drug trafficking, particularly in the the north east area of Honduras, the coastal area, where there are few police or they are corrupt. Other people become rich from cutting mahogany, because we have the second best mahogany in the world. It is being put under protection, but illegal exploitation is a problem. Rural people are being banned from using their land. Drug trafficking is there. People are confused about what to do.

In my community, they no longer recognize the importance of land, because development has distorted their thinking. They spend money they receive from the US and wait for more, without producing anything. They are abandoning their tradition of planting and growing things that they need for themselves. Now it is important to have dollars to buy Nike shoes. They think that land is something from the past, that we do not have to continue getting our hands and feet dirty, doing hard work on the land, because someone else has migrated to work in the United States, and will send dollars home.

That attitude has opened a gap. The government puts lands under total protection, so people do not have land to grow food, only a place to live. No other measure is being taken to provide for them. Education should show people that they have opportunities in front of them. They can learn to catch up with development by using land and profiting from it. People also need education to understand what politicians are offering, to recognize who will benefit from proposed arrangements.

Corruption is causing problems with communal land. When new officials take over in a village, they start selling common land to private owners, at which point it is set aside and not worked, so people have no access to the land. Some land is used by private enterprises.

### **Land Titles, Land Reform, Land Taxes**

Our problems are tied to what has happened to land as a source of live-

lihood. Small-scale farmers are vulnerable because they risk their land when they borrow money for production. If they cannot repay the loan, they lose their land. Many people work on *latifundias* as share-croppers.

Land titles are manipulated to deprive people of what is theirs. On the north coast there are areas they suspect have oil. People are being evicted from that land. People are also denied access to areas where tourism can be developed. People need clear title to land so they can put up a house or grow food or go fishing. Even in the case of fishing, people are being denied access to their traditional fishing grounds, but industrialized fishing companies are being given permission to fish. But just giving people title to land, as Hernando de Soto is saying, is not enough, because it does not always give people the right to be in that area and work in that area. Sometimes getting title gives people no hope to work. That is going on in Brazil and other countries in Latin America.

Because there is a huge amount of land that is not in use, the government very often promotes land reform to give land to the people. This happened also in the 1980s. When people receive some land, they have to put it to work, and in order to work they need financing. So they go to the bank for a loan, but if they cannot keep up with the payments, they lose it again. So it is a vicious cycle: you have land; you lose it again. If that happens, the land may be used by the tourism industry, which exploits forest land that is being put under protection.

One way land reform could happen is by way of taxes. People who concentrate ownership of the most useful and fertile land would be taxed more than those who do not have worthwhile land. That would encourage owners to use land productively.

In order to fulfill the right to life, people need access to land. If someone claims ownership of land, he should put it to work, take only what he has created through his own work, and give to the community the rent of the land: the part of production that was contributed by the land and not by his work. That portion belongs to the community. We should establish a form of taxation that works for each particular country based on its development and the way land is used.

Taxing land allows private ownership, but it eliminates land speculation. That could alleviate the situation on the north coast of Honduras where vast areas are used for cattle grazing. That land is not in use, at least not totally in use. As a result, a huge amount of people have moved from the countryside to the big cities, because they lack a place to plant crops for themselves. They

## WHY GLOBAL POVERTY?

are living in very poor conditions, without potable water or sewers, in poorly constructed houses, along rivers where there is danger of flooding, wherever land is not being used. They do not know how to read and write and they lack skills. They know very well how to grow food, but what can they do in cities? So they build around the main cities. Poverty and crime increase there.

If land were taxed, landowners would either pay something back to the community or give the land back to the community or the government, so the government could give it to those who want to work that land and produce. Right now, Honduras has to import agricultural products because we are not growing enough food. If the tax system encouraged people to grow food, perhaps we could have enough once again.

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