Van Hoyweghen (1999) The Urgency of Land and Agrarian Reform in Rwanda

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This article addresses the issue of land reform in Rwanda, and was written a mere five years after the Genocide occurred. At that point, Rwanda was still very much a post-conflict society, with groups of people who had slaughtered one another now attempting to reconcile and rebuild.

Van Hoyweghen immediately addresses the need for land reform in a post-conflict setting. The balance of power has irrevocably changed, and land distribution must reflect those changes in order to achieve and maintain any kind of stability. Additionally, as land is often damaged in armed conflicts (and this happened in Rwanda), land scarcity was a major issue at this point in Rwanda’s redevelopment and needed to be addressed. Adding to this problem was a large number of exiles and refugees who returned to Rwanda after the genocide and entered into the competition for land as well.

The article then breaks down into three distinct parts. The first focuses on the socio-economic history of land ownership in general and in Rwanda. Next, land ownership is addressed from a more political perspective with respect to power and control of land. The final section offers some suggestions to the Rwandan government for how best to handle the multi-faceted issue of land reform in Rwanda’s unique post-conflict society.

Van Hoyweghen (1999:371) writes that “Everyone (the government, international experts and donors alike) agrees today that the unendurable pressure on land needs to be urgently relieved in order to avoid endangering the country’s future. There also seems to be agreement as to the technical measures to be taken in order to resolve the agrarian crisis encompassing the land problem.” (p371)

However, the author goes on to admit there is a lack of capability of the state to effectively address the issue. Communal bonds are required for successful agrarian reform, she suggests. She acknowledges those bonds were “weakened” by the Genocide, but doesn’t seem to appreciate just how damaged those bonds were by genocidal conflict. Additionally, the author suggests a laissez-faire approach by the state in certain subsets of the agricultural sector – a policy suggestion which would very likely fall on deaf ears in President Mugabe’s office, who runs a heavy-handed, very big and invasive national government.

In sum, Van Hoyweghen provides an excellent analysis of land reform in the Rwanda of 1999 which effectively highlights the problems and urgency associated with land reform and the agricultural sector in a post-conflict society. Her policy suggestions are appropriate for an idealized post-conflict setting where all parties are working towards the greater good in a logical fashion, but do not take into account the dictatorial tendencies of President Mugabe and his penchant for heavy government involvement in the reconstruction of Rwandan society.

*Excellent choice and a very well written summary with good critical commentary.*