

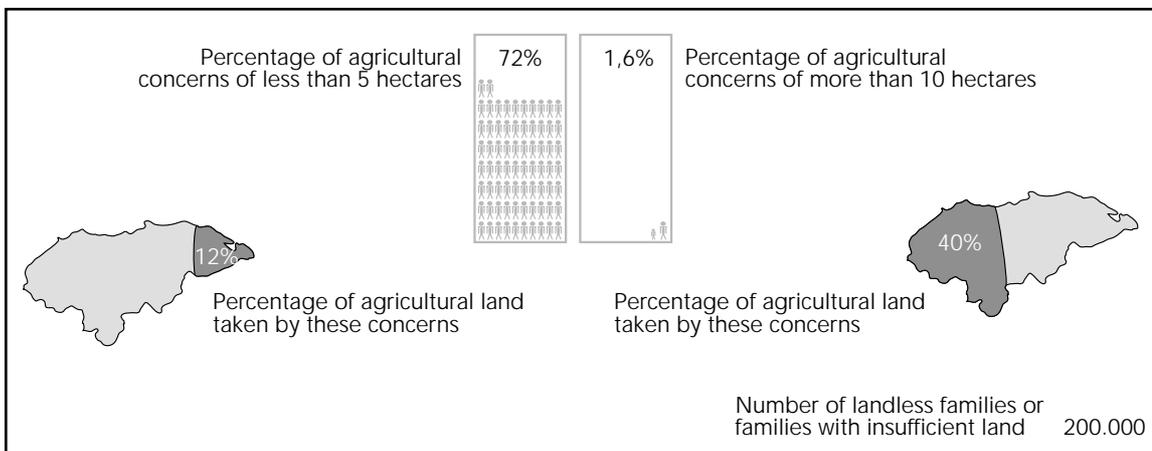
## Agrarian Reform in Honduras

Juan Antonio Cruz was asleep in his hammock when they caught him by surprise in the grey light of dawn. He did not even have time to wake up properly. The shots penetrated through the wooden walls of his hut. As the murderers withdrew, they left a bloodstained scene and a clear message: anyone fighting for land reform is taking a big risk. Antonio is the second victim to date in the struggle over the privately owned estates of the CAGSSA, which lie in the middle of the fertile region on the Atlantic coast of Honduras. The messengers of death have, however, not achieved their aim: the peasants' struggle continues.

### The land issue in Honduras

The most important land reform initiative in Honduras dates back to the year 1962 when the land reform law ("Ley de Reforma Agraria") was passed. This law envisaged a programme of land redistribution which did not meet with the demands of the social function of ownership. The 70's were termed the "Golden Age" of land reform in Honduras: in particular in the five years between 1973 and 1977 120,000 hectares were redistributed. Over three decades a total of 409,000 hectares (the equivalent of 12.3% of the agricultural area of Honduras) were handed over to 60,000 peasant families (the equivalent of 13% of the rural population). Even though the land reform programme has been shown to have had a positive influence, it nevertheless failed to halt the continuing parallel process of increasing concentration of land ownership. Land ownership is to the present day characterised by its gross inequality.

### Land distribution in Honduras in figures



According to the official 1993 statistics on agriculture more than 126,000 peasant families have neither access to land nor a secure place of employment. This figure represents 27% of the rural population. If we add to this group the 80,000 peasant families (at least), who own less than 1 hectare of land, we are confronted with the disturbing figure of more than 200,000 families, or 44% of the rural population who have either no or very limited access to land. These families live in extreme conditions and form the core of that group of the rural community who suffer from extreme poverty.





Since 1992 the land reform programme has virtually collapsed. Within the framework of the programme of structural adjustment the Law for Agrarian Modernisation ("Ley de Modernización") came into force. This law largely restricted access to land to those who could express their needs in terms of "effective demand". This meant in effect that they had to be in a position to purchase land. The law is based upon the neoliberal concept of land being no more than one of a variety of commodities that can be bought and sold without any state intervention. In this respect the law has drastically compromised the professed aims of the implementation of the land reform which until now had realised the social function of private ownership as laid down in the constitution of the Republic of Honduras. Furthermore, the law has led to the frequent selling of land that had been previously distributed during the process of land reform. Resultantly, Honduras is once again experiencing a skewed land distribution pattern: in only three years over 15,000 hectares of fertile land on the Atlantic Coast has been bought again by both the banana plantation producers, Standard Fruit Company (Dole) and Tela Railroad Company (Chiquita), which at the turn of the last century had acquired thousands of hectares of land.



## The New Dynamism

The extreme devastation wreaked by Hurricane Mitch in November of 1998 has meant that the subject of land reform, within the framework of the rebuilding of the country, has returned to the national agenda. It is clear that there is a close correlation between the economic, social and ecological conditions, and the pattern of land ownership. Worst hit by the hurricane were the peasant families, who, as they had no agricultural land of their own, were obliged to settle in areas where living and cultivating conditions were insecure. These people thus lost everything when Hurricane Mitch destroyed their houses and land.

The demonstration on 12th October 1999 in Tegucigalpa, which heralded the Global Campaign for Agrarian Reform, clearly showed what the land reform meant to the farming and indigenous sections of the population in Honduras. Despite massive repression, more than 12,000 people, 19 of whom were injured in scuffles with the police, took part. This great social mobilisation clearly demonstrated that the subject of land reform forms a crucial part of the process of reconstruction. In the course of the following discussions the Honduran government recognised

that access to land and agricultural development are essential components of Honduras' reconstruction. The government has declared itself ready to revise the law for agrarian modernisation -- the law which has brought land reform to a standstill since 1992.

Given this new found dynamism the Global Campaign for Agrarian Reform -- co-ordinated by FIAN and La Via Campesina -- aims to give intensive support to the promotion of agrarian reform in Honduras. Three concrete aims are highlighted for the year 2000:

1. inclusion of the agrarian reform in the strategy for reduction of poverty, which must be worked on by Honduras to achieve relief from foreign debt;
2. guarantee that the land fund sponsored by the World Bank in Honduras complements the other land reform measures and does not substitute them;
3. implementation of the prevailing laws on land reform in concrete cases, as in the case of the agricultural and stock-breeding company CAGSSA, whose land ownership exceeds the legally permissible upper limit.

## Agrarian Reform and Human Rights

The agrarian reform forms part of the Honduran State's obligations regarding the human right to food as recognised in Article 11 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights of the United Nations. The landless farmers cannot realise their basic right to feed themselves, to free themselves from hunger and misery, if access to the resources of production - in particular to land - is denied to them.

## Access to land and the Strategy for the Reduction of Poverty

As a consequence of the global campaign "Jubilee 2000", which advocates the waiving of foreign debt for the developing nations, the major lenders have declared that they are ready to waive a portion of the debts for the group of "the poorest countries which are deeply indebted". Though this can only be seen as a first step, the opportunities which present themselves especially in the case of Honduras, must be seized.

Following the decisions of the governments of the creditor countries the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) have worked out a set of conditions for those countries which wish to be included in the measures for the group of deeply indebted countries. In order to be able to claim partial relief from foreign debts, the governments of the countries in question must commit themselves to working out a strategy for the reduction of poverty in co-operation with civil society and the financial institutions.

In this strategy aimed at the reduction of poverty three principle elements must be considered: firstly, the people belonging to the category of the poor must be identified; secondly, the political measures most suitable to the fight against poverty and its causes must be identified; and finally, indicators must be specified within the strategy by which the short, medium and long term results of the strategy can be evaluated. In the documentation of the World Bank and the IMF, in which the basic conditions for this new "Strategy for the Reduction of Poverty" are described, access to land is highlighted, both regarding the possible causes of poverty as well as the possible political measures which the governments should undertake in their battle against poverty.

In the case of Honduras the strategy for the reduction of poverty is to be worked out in the coming months. Considering the full meaning accorded to access to land in the reduction of poverty, it is imperative to include a comprehensive agrarian reform programme in the strategy for the reduction of poverty. The Honduran government must establish a clearly defined programme for access to land and for agricultural development if it wishes to tackle poverty. In such a programme social movements must be actively involved in all stages of the process.

## Land market and land reform

As in many other countries there are currently discussions in Honduras about proposals for the development of the land market, in order to facilitate access to the resources of production for the poor peasant families. The merits of this model are, however, very limited, as using the market as an instrument with which to distribute and redistribute land is more likely to lead to an even more acute polarisation of land ownership. It is precisely those people who do not dispose of the necessary capital to buy land who are excluded. The old basic principle of land reform, "land belongs to those who work it" is being replaced by a new one: "land is only for those who can pay for it".

When this change of models is carried out in practice a whole string of highly problematic issues will result. Firstly the social function of ownership as it is established in the Honduran cons-

titution will be undermined. Secondly, the constitutional mandate that land reform in Honduras receives, will be thrown into question. Finally, land will become a highly demanded commodity in a market that is far from being able to offer even a small degree of equal opportunity. The majority of the landless will remain excluded from this market as they lack purchasing power.

The Land Fund Project must be analysed with particular focus on these points of view. The attempt to promote access to land through the market should be seen simply as a complement to the actual land reform process and in no way a substitute for it.

## The implementation of the land reform and the CAGSSA case



The conflict between 250 peasant farming families and the agricultural company, CAGSSA in Guanchías in the Yoro district is a clear testimony to the failing implementation of the current land reform laws in Honduras. These families are currently faced with the risk of having to leave the land that they have been farming for the last five years. Their basic human right to feed themselves is hereby jeopardised to an alarming extent.

According to Article 25 of the land reform law, land reform should take place on large land holdings which either exceed an upper limit of land ownership (so-called "superfluous land") or are lying fallow. Both conditions pertain in the case of Guanchías. The National Agrarian Institute (INA) has announced that CAGSSA has exceeded the upper limit permitted under the law by 1,352 hectares of fallow land. In spite of this the authorities were unable to include this land, which is the property of the agricultural and stockbreeding company CAGSSA (Compañía Agrícola y Ganadera de Sula S.A.), in the land reform process, because the Ministry of Agriculture, invoking its jurisdiction over the interpretation of laws, allowed CAGSSA this additional land.

Since January of this year the representatives of CAGSSA have once again been threatening a mass eviction of the peasants. In August of 1998 in similar circumstances one of the peasants was murdered. The crime remains unpunished to this day.

The CAGSSA case is a clear demonstration that the Honduran government in the form of the Ministry of Agriculture is refusing to implement the land reform laws which are present. The government is consequently violating its obligation to guarantee its population's right to feed themselves as stipulated in Article 11 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Human Rights. This is despite the fact that Honduras has ratified this Covenant.

The political significance of this case lies in the fact that it represents a precedent for the implementation or non-implementation of land reform in Honduras. If this case is won in favour of the peasants the opportunity to expropriate more fallow land would then present itself.



The goal of the Global Campaign for Agrarian Reform of FIAN and La Via Campesina is the implementation of an agrarian reform which is centred around human rights, and pursues an agriculture which:

- gives the poor peasant families control over the land, seed and water, so that they can live with dignity;
- produces healthy and GM free foodstuffs for all;
- guarantees a sustainable production process which safeguards the principles of healthy nutrition for future generations;
- reinforces the rights of the female agricultural workers;
- guarantees the sovereignty of the right of every human being to feed himself;
- strengthens the communities in rural areas.



**Further fact sheets on the Global Campaign for Agrarian Reform:**

- Agrarian reform and Human Rights
- Agrarian Reform in Brazil
- Agrarian Reform in the Philippines
- World Bank Land Policies
- Agrarian Reform and the Environment
- Agrarian Reform and Women's Rights

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**FIAN (Food First Information and Action Network): For the Human Right to Feed Oneself**

FIAN is the International Human Rights Organisation working for the right to feed oneself. FIAN was founded in 1986 and today has members in over 60 countries world wide. FIAN's aim is to contribute in the

whole world to the implementation of the International Bill of Human Rights.

FIAN works in particular for the right to feed oneself of persons and groups threatened by hunger and malnutrition.



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**La Via Campesina: For the right to produce and for food sovereignty**

Via Campesina is an international movement coordinating organizations of small and middle peasants, agricultural workers, rural women and indigenous people in more than 65 countries in the Americas, Asia, Africa and Europe. The main aim of Via

Campesina is to develop the solidarity and unity in diversity between rural organisations in order to promote economic relations based on equality and justice, the defence of their lands, food sovereignty, and a sustainable agriculture based on small and middle producers.