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Honduras: Improving Lives by Securing Property Rights

Honduras is a country filled with constant struggle; a struggle to survive. Honduras is a low income, food deficient nation of 7.5 million people located in the heart of Central America (“Honduras”). Mountains cover a majority of the land and natural disasters, such as hurricanes and floods, are recurring, yet the population consists mainly of rural, subsistence farmers. With over 1.5 million Hondurans facing hunger every day, food insecurity is a major problem (“Honduras”). Extremely low standards of living, almost the lowest in the Western Hemisphere, do not look promising to improve in the near future due to a high rate of population growth. Honduras is lagging in development according to many indicators and is one of the least urbanized countries of Central America (Merrill).

Smallholder farmers make up the majority of the rural population. The typical subsistence family is composed of 5-6 members with 3-4 kids. Family is extremely important in the Honduran culture and is the fundamental social unit in the country. Rural men are the main income providers, mostly through agricultural production, and are the primary decision-makers of the family. The role of rural women is to maintain the household and raise the children (“Bridging the Gap”). Rural farm families struggle with poor living conditions. Most live in one or two room huts with a thatch roof and dirt floors. Their diet consists mainly of corn tortillas, beans, plantains, and rice; meat or fish is a rare supplement. Chronic malnutrition reaches rates as high as 48 percent in rural areas (“Honduras”). The state of education in Honduras is extremely insufficient. The public education system struggles with a shortage of schools, staff, and funding. Because of this, the quality of education received from the public system is far below more developed nations. For rural, farm families, education is a privilege. Only 43 percent of children complete the primary level (Merrill), and nearly 25 percent of the population is illiterate (“Honduras Vital Statistics”). Rural families have great difficulty accessing healthcare, and the quality of health services is lacking, which leads to poor health in the country. This is apparent in the infant mortality rate, which has reached nearly 2.6 percent, and in the life expectancy rate, which hovers down around 69 years (“Honduras Vital Statistics”). HIV/AIDS is growing to be a major issue with .70 percent of the population living with the disease (“Honduras”).

Honduras is an agrarian country, and the majority of the rural population is farmers. Smallholder farmers, on average, have access to only five hectares of land (“Rural Poverty in Honduras”). This is not enough to feed and support their family. Because of this, many subsistence farmers commonly seek part-time labor to supplement their farming income. The main crops grown by rural families are coffee, sugar, and corn. Bad agricultural practices and techniques by smallholders have caused poor crop productivity and degradation of the environment. Attempts to farm marginal land of mountainsides and deforestation of land have contributed to soil erosion and loss of crops. Cultivation methods and lack of fertilizer use have also contributed to the environmental issues (Merrill). Because of the bad agricultural practices and insecure land rights in Honduras, smallholders are hesitant to invest their precious time and resources into their land.

Rural subsistence farm families struggle with low agricultural productivity that threatens their ability to make an income large enough to meet their needs. Shortage of available land (only 15 percent of land is suitable for agriculture, Merrill), lack of secure property rights, and bad farming practices are the main causes of this low productivity and contribute greatly to the issue of food insecurity. Smallholder farmers lack access to credit in order to get the capital they need to improve their land and invest in other income producing activities. Gender and cultural discrimination puts many smallholders at an even greater

disadvantage regarding land and credit access and community and family decision-making. Secure property rights for rural, smallholder farmers would improve agricultural productivity, income capability, access to credit, gender and cultural discrimination, and ideally end the struggle to survive so many Hondurans face every day.

The lack of secure property rights, access to credit, and gender and cultural equality greatly affects agricultural productivity and farm income in Honduras.

Secure access to land for Honduran smallholder farmers is crucial for their survival and growth. Land is a key determinant of their livelihood, income, power, and status. Land ownership can reduce food insecurity by providing means in which to make an income. Secure tenure can decrease the impact of climate change, drought, disease pandemics, and global market fluctuations by providing a safety net for the smallholder farmers ("Improving People's Access"). Tenure decreases poverty vulnerability by providing stability in times of shock (Meinzen-Dick). Land can be used as collateral to obtain credit, but without secure access many institutions are wary of accepting the land as collateral (Bakhtiari). Property rights are also associated with the well-being of household and social standing in the community. Land owners are treated with greater respect and have increased access to important services and opportunities (Meinzen-Dick).

Most rural, subsistence farmers in Honduras, however, don't have secure property rights or legally recognized land titles. Over 50 percent of Honduras's rural population is smallholder farmers who own no land or have access to less than five hectares ("Honduras Poverty and Wealth"). They are in danger every single day of having their land access stripped away from them. Without secure access, farmers are wary of investing money and time into the land. They have little incentive to invest in sustainable resource management or anything else that will improve the land ("Bridging the Gap"). Understandably, they don't want others to benefit from their hard work. This directly impacts smallholders' livelihoods, because lack of investment leads to less productive land, which in turn, leads to a lack of food to eat, or to sell to earn an income that's substantial enough to support their family.

Women and indigenous groups are especially vulnerable to losing their access to land at any time. Women make up the majority of the rural population, nearly 70 percent, yet the majority does not own or control any land ("Improving People's Access"). They are allowed to access land only through the men of their family – their father, husbands, or sons. If this fragile link is lost through death, divorce, or disinheritance, their access is taken from them (Meinzen-Dick). Land grabbing schemes that strip property from widows and indigenous groups are common and widespread in Honduras. Lack of secure access undermines the economic, social, and political opportunities of the marginalized groups ("Improving People's Access").

In Honduras, the lack of secure access to land is a very large problem. In the 2010 Index of Economic Freedom, property rights scored a 30. This is far below the world average of 43.8. The index score indicates that protection of property is very weak due to lack of judicial security, deteriorating security environment, and corruption. Honduran real estate laws and practices are substantially weaker than those even in other underdeveloped countries. The property rights protection score indicated no change from last year's index (Miller & Holmes). The lack of change in the issue of property rights is not a good sign for rural smallholder farmers because it shows that attempts at improving tenure have been ineffective.

Property rights and land access in Honduras, just like in other developing nations, is a very complex issue. Authority over them derives from multiple sources including state and federal laws, community systems, and customary and religious traditions. Often, these sources clash over who controls ownership of the land because there are multiple claims to the land (Meinzen). Property rights are dynamic and include not only being able to use the land, but also deciding how the land is used, enjoying what is

produced from the land (food, shelter, profits), using the land as collateral, excluding people from the land, and transferring land rights. Different people own different rights for the same parcel of land ("FAO Land Tenure"). These multiple sources and rights to land combine to form a very complicated system.

Throughout history, land tenure systems have attempted to govern access to the land. This is a very complicated system because many land rights in Honduras aren't formal. The government doesn't have the resources or structure in place to title and register all rural agricultural land. Nearly 80 percent of the privately held land is untitled ("Honduras Country Specific Information"). On the other side of the fence, smallholder farmers lack the resources that are necessary to complete the rigorous government titling process.

Improving or resolving the issue of property rights would significantly improve the lives of rural, smallholder families. Secure access would provide the incentive for subsistence farmers to invest time and resources into improving the land. These investments would directly impact productivity of the land and therefore, increase their food supply and income potential. If smallholder farmers are not afraid of losing their land, they are more likely to practice good land management techniques such as cultivation and fertilizer use. Not only will good land management techniques improve productivity, but they will also help preserve the environment. Soil erosion, watershed deterioration, and deforestation have been increasing at alarming rates due to the practice of bad management ("Honduras Vital Statistics"). With improved property rights, these rates could be slowed or even reversed.

Credit empowers the poor to be able to invest in their future, and it gives them the opportunity to grow and prosper economically. Credit is becoming increasingly important to provide the capital that smallholder farmers need to buy seeds, tools, fertilizer, and other resources to improve land productivity and environmental sustainability. Economic development in rural areas could also be improved by access to credit because smallholder farmers would have the capital to invest in other income producing activities and business enterprises, rather than just the necessities needed for survival (Magner). Access to credit for rural smallholder farmers can be heightened by improving property rights. Land is an asset that, in theory, can be used as collateral in order to access credit. The majority of Honduran smallholder farmers do not have formal documentation of land rights, and therefore struggle to use their land as collateral ("FAO Land Tenure"). Micro-financing institutions, institutions that specialize in providing financial services to the poor, are hesitant to provide credit to smallholder farmers because of the large risk of the farmers losing their land (Magner). Rural families, who own land and have formal documentation, have a 10 percent greater chance of receiving credit approval (Field & Torero). Secure land access could also positively affect gender and cultural equality. In Honduras, status is tied directly to ownership of land. Land owners have more input in community matters such as government, education, and development, and therefore, most of these opportunities benefit them (Meinzen-Dick). Without gender equity in land rights, over 50 percent of rural, smallholder farmers, mostly women and indigenous groups, don't have an effective voice in national or community governance, and are excluded from the benefits of developmental projects ("FAO Land Tenure"). If women and indigenous groups had equal access to land and credit, there would be higher economic and agricultural productivity in Honduras.

The population of Honduras is growing by over two percent every year. The expanding population is a serious challenge to a country that already struggles with inadequate healthcare services and education, and widespread malnutrition and unemployment. Even though agriculture is the largest economic activity and employer of rural families, only 15 percent of the land or 1.7 million hectares is suitable for agricultural use (Merrill). The lack of secure property rights will only continue to increase if more and more people need access to land in order to make an income.

Honduras has experienced environmental destruction on an alarmingly large scale. Deforestation due to logging and clearing the land for agricultural use has depleted much of the original forest land. Land degradation and soil erosion is almost uncontrollable due to improper land management practices and techniques such as farming marginal lands (“Honduras Vital Statistics”).

Rural farmers are key players in the process of confronting and overcoming the challenges of population growth and environmental destruction. In order to combat increased food insecurity caused by increased populations, smallholder farmers must make their land more productive through investments and management practices. In turn, these investments and better practices would lead to increased environmental sustainability by stopping the destruction currently taking place. The only way smallholder farmers will be willing to invest the time and resources needed is if they are confident they will benefit from it, so it is vital that secure property rights are achieved for subsistence farmers. In order to solve anything, the root of the problem must be tackled. The issues of gender and cultural discrimination and lack of access to credit revolve around a central problem – lack of secure property rights. By solving the issue of property rights, the other issues will also be resolved because land ownership will improve access to credit and gender and cultural equality.

Secure access to land can be solved by formalizing land rights of smallholder farmers. The first step in this process is the Honduran government must develop land titling and land tenure policies that recognize the complexity of property rights in rural areas and are targeted towards smallholder farmers. Customary laws that are already in place should be updated to give women and indigenous groups equal access. The second step is to make the land titling process more efficient, accessible, and inexpensive to smallholder farmers by creating an official government department with the capacity to process land records and claims in timely and orderly fashion. In order to be effective, this department must be the only source of legalized, formal titles and have authority over customary and religious land rights. The third step is to inform the rural population of Honduras, especially the smallholder families, of their land rights and how to obtain formal documentation of their land ownership. The fourth step is to accompany the policy changes and developments with effective implementation. The policies will only work if they are enforced.

Rural communities, the national government, and other organizations will play key roles in all steps of the process of securing land rights. Rural communities must be willing to accept the new land policies and process of land titling. They also must realize that those policies will take priority over customary law, especially in regards to equal access for all. Women and indigenous groups should have an active voice in all community decision-making and equal opportunity for land, credit, and other resources. The attitudes of the communities must change or the traditional practices of discrimination will continue regardless of the new policies.

The Honduran national government will have the most prominent role in solving the root problem of property rights. They have the responsibility to develop new land reform policies that give formal rights to smallholder farmers. The government must create a department that only handles land titling and has the capacity to do that efficiently. They also must implement and enforce the new policies effectively.

Other organizations will also play a role in the process. The Food and Agricultural Organization must continue to advocate for secure property rights and land access equity especially for women and indigenous groups (“Bridging the Gap”). Micro-financing institutions need to be willing to provide smallholder farmers with credit and continue to adapt and grow to better meet the needs of rural, subsistence families. The Grameen Bank is a great example of a micro-finance institution that is centered on helping the rural poor (Bakhtiari). Non-governmental agencies should be utilized in spreading the word to rural communities about the new policies. They can inform smallholders of their rights and

explain how the process works. If the rural communities, Honduran government, and different organizations work together, the main problem of insecure property rights can be solved, and therefore, so can the problems of gender and cultural discrimination and lack of access to credit.

The nation of Honduras faces many struggles. Food insecurity leaves much of the population malnourished. It has the lowest standards of living in Central America and has inadequate healthcare and education systems. The lack of development and urbanization does not look to improve in the near future due to a rapidly growing population. Recurrent national disasters make it hard for the country to be economically stable.

Rural, smallholder families face many struggles. For many, the main struggle is to survive. The major issues of lack of secure property rights, lack of access to credit, and gender and cultural discrimination have caused widespread food insecurity, undermined smallholder farmers' ability to support their families, and limited their opportunities to grow and prosper. These issues must be solved through a collaborate effort by rural communities, the national government, and other organizations to develop and implement policies aimed at creating secure property rights for rural, subsistence farmers. By solving these issues, the struggle Honduran smallholder families face every single day to simply survive would end. They would be free to thrive.

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