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Reading the World Development Report 2008: Agriculture for Development

Tania M. Li

Editor's introduction
Publication of the World Development Report 2008: Agriculture for Development (WDR 2008) signals recognition in the World Bank of the continued importance of agricultural production in the livelihoods of the majority of the world's population. WDR 2008 has received significant attention from activists and scholars, who have offered critical reflections from different perspectives. For the purpose of our forum, we asked scholars currently researching agrarian issues in different corners of the global south to comment on the Report from the perspective of their regional expertise. How well does it reflect the ground level realities that researchers encounter? How sharp are its diagnoses and prescriptions? What is present, and what is missing, in the Report's approach to agrarian relations?

Our forum begins with an essay by Carlos Oya, which offers an overview of some of the main features of the Report, highlighting in particular the tensions and contradictions that derive from its attempt to engage diverse actors, and convey optimistic, win-win scenarios. A cluster of papers on Asia emphasise dynamic processes overlooked or underestimated by the Report. Derek Hall offers a striking account of the current expansion of agriculture in Southeast Asia, driven largely by ‘booms’ in commercial crops such as coffee and oil palm, and considers the changing relationships of people to land. The paper by A. Haroon Akram-Lodhi, focused on South Asia, and the paper by Noer Fauzi Rachman, Laksmi A. Savitri, and Mohamad Shohibuddin, focused on Indonesia, highlight the generation of inequalities within capitalist agriculture, casting doubt on the Report's propositions about poverty reduction. Tania Li takes a closer look at the Bank's recommendation that the best option for Asia's rural poor is to exit agriculture and work for wages. The papers by Thembela Kepe, on southern Africa, and Carlota McAllister, on Guatemala, emphasise the historical amnesia of the Report, and the violence that created radically unequal patterns of landownership. For the poor in these regions, rural livelihoods have long been derived from wage work, from the informal sector, and from state or private transfers – engaging people in precisely the set of strategies WDR 2008 promotes as novel pathways to a better future. Kregg Hetherington concludes the forum
with a view from Paraguay, and with his reflections on the nature of knowledge produced by
the Bank, in an era when the concept of development seems increasingly incoherent.

The papers by Akram-Lodhi, Hall, Li, Kepe, McAllister, and Hetherington were first presented
at a forum on WDR 2008 organised by Tania Li and Gavin Smith for the Development
Seminar, Center for International Studies, University of Toronto in two sessions in October
and November 2007. Thanks to CIS and the co-sponsors of the Development Seminar
(Anthropology, Sociology, Geography, Political Science, and the Centre for Comparative,
International and Development Education at OISE/UT). Thanks to Jun Borras for encouraging
us to publish the forum in The Journal of Peasant Studies.