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Dear President Reagan:

It is with great pleasure that we learn of your decision to personally attend the Cancun Conference with 22 other international leaders. It is right that you and the other world leaders seek economic policies that will help bring justice to the quarter of the world which goes to bed hungry each night.

As the Brandt Commission states, "Mankind, (we) has never before had such ample technical and financial resources for coping with hunger and poverty. The immense task can be tackled once the necessary collective will is mobilized. What is necessary can be done and must be done."

That is why it is so vitally important that you have accepted the invitation to attend this historic meeting. Most major projections for the future include predictions of enormous population growth, a widening gap between the rich and poor nations, the destruction of forests, deterioration of agricultural soil, water shortages and extinction of plant and animal species.

That the land issue is critical to all these issues is obvious. In the words of Henry George, "it is the indispensable element necessary to the life of every human being. We are all land animals; our very bodies come from the land, and to the land they return again."

Eric Eckholm, a world authority on ecological problems recognizes this fact, as we must, that the most critical problem facing the Cancun Conference is the land tenure question. Eckholm in his fine Worldwatch monograph (June 1979 - "The Dispossession of the Earth: Land Reform and Sustainable Development) says that most of the issues faced by the international community - the elimination of malnutrition, jobs, slowing runaway rural-urban migration etc. are not likely to be solved without radical changes in the ownership and control of the land.

Patterns of land ownership shape patterns of human relationships. They help determine the possibility and pace of economic change. To ignore the land tenure question, and in fact, not to give it primary focus at the upcoming meeting will most likely guarantee that your recommended policies will fail to produce the desired results.

The global development process has bypassed the landless laborers, shareholders, and marginal farmers who are struggling to improve their lives through agriculture - but without secure access to the basis of agricultural life - land.

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We cannot divide the resources of the earth equally among the billions who will be here in the 21st Century and beyond. But we can divide up the wealth of the land more equitably so that all individuals in society, as well as the entire private sector, may solve the critical problems of mankind.

Many studies have shown that improvements in social and economic conditions reduces much of the pressure on the land. In Taiwan, for example, after a carefully articulated land reform program, the population rates fell from 3.8 % to 2.2%. An extensive system of farm cooperatives provide credit, markets and new technology. Not only have the farmers doubled their output, they have provided employment for rural dwellers, lessening the burden on the cities.

The productive farmers of Taiwan had gained access to their own land, a promise made a quarter of century before by Sun Yat Sen. The ratio of income - comparing the richest and poorest fifth of the population- fell from 15:1 in 1950 to 4.5:1 in 1969, after the land reform. This has produced the most equitable distribution of wealth in the Far East after Japan. And the rural progress of the farmer has not been subsidized by taxes on the urban and industrial sectors but paid out of the farmers increased productivity.

These results or similar ones have been generated by many different models of land reform in free and planned economies. But not all programs produce such results, even if under the guise of land reform. In Mexico, for example, the lot of the poorest fifth of the population fell 20% under their land reform program while in Taiwan the economic standing of the poorest fifth improved by over 200%. In Taiwan birth rates fell during this period; in Mexico birth rates fell very little from 3.5% to 3.4%.

The Taiwan model is unique in that it fuses Western and Chinese ideals in securing equality. Not only did the government provide the necessary support systems to the tiller, made land available to those who would farm it, but also called upon all those who had pieces of land to pay a fair rent or premium for that privilege and used that fund for the benefit of all the people.


There are important lessons to be learned from the Taiwan experience. Land cannot be held idle by an elite group or used for exports of crops, but must be used initially and primarily in most of the world to feed the people of the nation. During most of the major famines of the world, including the Irish famines, food was being exported by landholders while the people were starving.

Taiwan, South Korea and other countries have proven that a sound tax program must be involved in order to equitably distribute the wealth of a society. If the producers are not rewarded then production falls or is not existent. Monopoly control of land and natural resources by small groups in society must be broken in order to provide justice and bread in a society.

If the Cancun Conferences retains the paradigm that land tenure systems must gratify ownership without effort, then its hopes for the future will be dashed on the record of the past. Inequitable land tenure systems which allow monopoly of nature's resources and denies access to the land to the laborer, guarantee injustice and poverty and the accelerated population growth we see in all the underdeveloped countries.

Mankind ended the scourge of small pox in ten years, once the commitment was made to use its resources and will despite numerous problems. The Cancun Conference can be the beginning of such an effort to end poverty and hunger in the world.

We applaud your attendance and offer you our support and energy in a joint commitment to a just world.


E. ROBERT SCROFANI
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