

John Heath

'Possibilist' Responses to the Challenge of Land Reform in Colombia: first, Hirschman, then the World Bank.

In different ways, and at different times, Albert Hirschman and the World Bank grappled with the challenge, in Colombia, posed by the skewed pattern of land ownership and the underuse of land suitable for farming. In the early 1960s, Hirschman backed an administrative approach to land reform, led by a state agency. In the mid-1990s, the World Bank championed a new, market-assisted approach to land reform, building on legislation introduced by the Colombia government. Both approaches were, in Hirschman's sense, 'possibilist': they aimed to seize a unique opportunity in a specific historical conjuncture. Both attempts failed. They neither reduced the level of concentration of landholding; nor did they help to reduce rural poverty and create a new class of prosperous small farmers. But, in response, to the failure of the market-assisted approach in the 1990s, the government of Colombia and the World Bank were quick to seize an alternative to land reform that held out a similar promise of promoting small farmers. This was another possibilist response. This paper will examine the different contexts of these possibilist responses and analyze the factors helping to shape their prospects for success.