

# Preface

Management of land records, protection of public lands, assignment of land to the landless and economically weaker sections and development based on adequate land-use planning, form the basis of Land Governance. A country classified as 'developed' invariably has a reasonably fool-proof land management plan in place. In developing countries this issue assumes greater importance as the pressure on land and natural resources is often severe. The issue is also linked to the presence of rural poverty, agricultural land not in the name of tiller and skewed land holdings. The situation is no better in urban areas where while the economically powerful control holdings over most of the lands, the working class is forced to occupy miniscule proportion of the lands mostly in slum pockets and tenements. This situation is evident in most, if not all, urban settlements in the developing countries.

Over the years, the State has devised policies to ensure that the gap between the landed and the landless narrowed as quickly and as effectively as possible. However, there are many impediments to achieve this goal: vested interests that are forced to give up right over the land, spiralling land prices in urban areas and land being used as a source of authority and empowerment are some of them. The crucial role played by land in overall governance is brought out by the fact that even in countries where free distribution of land to the landless has been part of the State policy with a view to achieving agrarian reforms, in many cases the gap between the top 10 % and the bottom 10 % remains un-bridged. Most of the land distribution policies end up with the lands returning into the hands of the landed.

Apart from being a necessary condition for the healthy growth of a country's economy, land and land-based resources is also the commonest modes of exploitation. The power-holders get more land and resources assigned in their names, while the less powerful tend to lose whatever little they have. So notwithstanding land reforms measures in certain countries or regions, the probability of a neo-assignee alienating that land within his/her lifetime is three times higher than the average.

Given its importance in a country's economic growth, it is not surprising that land is also the source of many corrupt practices. There are a number of examples that emerge on a daily basis of how land and land-linked resources are grabbed by

the political and administrative power-holders in the name of their family members or for their cronies.

Land governance is linked to the management of land as well as natural resources, water bodies, forests and hilly areas. The poor enforcement of land laws becomes a cause for disasters. In other words, a well-designed Disaster Management Policy should have good land protection policies as its base. Whether it is in the context of landslides, floods, droughts or coastal erosion, it is often noticed that many of these disasters are the result of man-made illegal and forced interventions. The example of some countries or regions is often quoted in the context of climate change and how this impinges on the economic growth of the country or region. It is feared that with the rise in sea levels, some of the low-lying agricultural lands could get inundated that would result in higher rural to urban migration and larger pressure on the urban areas.

It is unfortunate that notwithstanding the numerous studies, Committee Reports and Court judgments, the extent of landlessness amongst the economically weaker section, does not seem to be decreasing. The lack of accountability among the law-makers and law-enforcers, the high level of human greed and the lack of transparency in land records are the main reasons. The seemingly futile battle of the average citizen against the powerful law enforcers can be won only when the positive forces combine. Such exploitation will continue unless and until the adversely-affected learn to ask questions; and they can do this only when they are empowered. Digitizing all land records, textual and spatial, ensuring such records are geo-referenced and thence made tamper-proof and placing all land-holding data in the public domain, would go a long way in empowering the citizens.

It is in this context that all the aforementioned factors need to be taken seriously, especially by the policy makers in these countries. A lot of research and surveys are carried out by academicians and researchers on these areas. However, most of these remain as publications on the shelves of libraries. Correlation and intermingling of ideas between academicians and researchers, on the one hand, and administrators and policy-makers on the other hand, rarely happen. The policy-makers, therefore, often act in the interest of the undeserving or for benefiting certain vested interests with nobody to seriously question them. Adverse agricultural policies, change in cropping patterns, lack of land use planning, encroachments permitted on river banks and within rivers and distribution of forest lands, hillocks, etc. are the result of such lack of co-ordination. It is amazing to think how much more can be achieved if both sets of persons can synergise their ideas and their strengths so that both could work for the benefit of not any single class or group but for welfare of the entire society. It is this message that comes across from each of the papers contained in this Anthology.

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