

Seattle groups work to secure land, shelter rights

Seattle-based groups — Rural Development Institute, Agros International and Habitat for Humanity — work to help secure land rights and shelter for people in the Northwest and around the world.

By Tim Hanstad, Greg Rake and Marty Kooistra, Special to The Times

Many of us in the U.S. don't think much about the relationship between land ownership and poverty. But for the 1.4 billion people on our planet who survive on less than \$1 a day, land is the most important asset they could have. It is the crucial source of shelter, food, income and security. And for the poorest in the United States, land and homeownership remains the unfulfilled American dream. This Monday's World Habitat Day is an opportunity to call attention to the universal need for secure land rights and shelter.

For Padma, a woman living in rural India, becoming a landowner transformed her life. Like many women in developing countries, Padma did not have legal rights to property. She worked as a day laborer, when work was available, earning 18 cents a day. Her children, who came to the fields with her, ate only one meal of rice gruel a day, not enough to provide them with the vital micronutrients they needed to thrive. They squatted in poor shelter, with poor sanitation and the threat of disease, and were prone to exploitation.

Today, Padma is a landowner. She earns \$5 a day with the flower business she started on her small plot of land. The income allowed her to build a home, grow plenty of food and send her children to school, giving them a future full of possibility. With help from the Rural Development Institute (RDI), a Seattle-based nonprofit that helps governments provide secure land rights for the poor, the government of India is now giving the same "micro-land ownership" opportunities to millions of families like Padma's, providing shelter, food security and economic prosperity at little cost.

Padma's story is not uncommon. In the Ixil region of Guatemala, landless rural residents spend days marching to the coast to work on plantations. In return, they are offered "rights" to plant corn and beans on land that is only marginally productive, leading to malnutrition and hunger. This migration means that families are either separated or, more often than not, everyone who can must go to work. As a result, few children attend school.

Last year, five of these young people graduated from a Guatemalan university. This was possible only because their parents purchased land through another Seattle-based nonprofit, Agros International. With the land, the parents no longer had to migrate and the children were able to go to school. Four of the five graduates were daughters, and all have moved back to their villages to give back to their communities.

The work of these Seattle-based organizations demonstrates the many benefits secure land tenure provides: food security, women's status, economic development and sustainable housing. Secure land rights give people a reason to invest in their land, improving agricultural production and environmental stewardship. It also reduces urban migration and creates political stability.

These struggles for a secure place to live aren't isolated to developing countries — they happen right here in Seattle. For a family of refugees from Ethiopia, their recent escape to the U.S. was a dream come true. But the only apartment they could afford in Seattle was cramped and infested by ants. The house was filled with mold, and the plumbing and electricity did not work so the family lacked heat. When they applied for help from Habitat for Humanity, they were initially turned down.

Although Habitat for Humanity strives to serve as many families as possible, it is a constant challenge to secure enough land in Seattle for all needy families. Fortunately, the city of Seattle donated property and the family now lives in a simple home with a 30-year, affordable mortgage.

In the Sept. 29 issue of Newsweek, one week before World Habitat Day, editor Fareed Zakaria described land rights as one of the five most important things that can help solve our world's problems. The efforts of local organizations such as Habitat for Humanity, RDI, Agros, World Vision and others demonstrates Seattle's role as a global leader in innovative solutions to some of our world's greatest issues, and shows the power of land rights and shelter in creating a safer, more secure world.

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