

Cartagena Declaration

International Academic Conference for Land, Life & Society
Universidad de Cartagena
Cartagena City, Colombia, February 20–22, 2026

We, the 410 participants from 321 universities, research institutions and organizations from across the world, gathered at the Universidad de Cartagena to discuss the possibilities and challenges for agrarian reforms and rural development. After three days of discussion, and drawing on the [Medellín Manifesto](#) from April 2025, the [Cape Town Declaration](#) of October 2025, and the Brasilia Statement of December 2025, we issue this collective statement.

We start from the awareness that land, water, marine spaces, and forests are life. Land cannot be reduced to a productive input, a commodity, a financial asset, a wasteland awaiting investment, or merely an object of study. It is a life source for a diverse multitude of ecosystems, flora, fauna, peoples, communities, and nation-states. Land is livelihood, identity, memory, culture, and dignity. When social movements demand agrarian reforms, they are demanding the right to life itself.

Agrarian reforms have been enacted in the past in every region of the world with varying degrees of success. Even the most far-reaching programs of land redistribution were not enough, and in most instances are facing drastic reversals today, being supplanted with market-based approaches and a new wave of concentration.

To address longstanding histories of dispossession, patriarchal, racial, and colonial extraction, reforms must be truly transformative. Land redistribution must correct historical wrongs and eliminate inequality. Land redistribution can restructure local markets, in favour of people rather than corporations, and provide access to the commons that underpin a vibrant democracy — education, medical care, and political space.

Landlessness and dispossession were created largely by and through commodification. Market-based solutions will not solve the problems created by the market itself. The commodification of land and nature— turning life into a thing to be bought and sold — is the problem, not the solution.

As scholars committed to rigorous research and evidence-based arguments, we stand with the social movements that are at the forefront of the struggle for land and life. Social movements are advancing an agrarian reform agenda redefined around the inseparable 4 R's: Recognition, Redistribution, Restitution, and Regulation.

Recognition of customary systems, ethnic and Indigenous territories, as well as distinct rights of women and young people, is needed to protect existing land access that is threatened by commodification and extractivism.

Redistribution of large landed properties is required to address historical inequity and level the playing field stacked in favor of the elite. This must allow for the breaking up of large estates, enabling people to access land in holdings suited to their needs.

Restitution is necessary to address waves of past and present involuntary displacements caused by land grabbing, violent expulsions, conflicts, and wars, including reparation for harms done and what has been lost.

Regulation is needed in order to put a ceiling on how much individuals and corporations can accumulate land, facilitate access for those who have no land, and enable those who have livelihoods based on land to make a decent income.

Redistribution without recognition, recognition without restitution, and similar divide-and-rule tactics have weakened the rural working people, their movements and struggles. Using one of these against the other has been the strategy of those opposed to transformative agrarian reforms: redistribution

without recognition resulted in peasants against Indigenous, or farmers against pastoralists, or peasants against artisanal fishers because the lands redistributed turned out to be Indigenous territories, grazing territories, or wetlands or landing areas of fisher peoples.

That is why social movements today are in a unified stand around the inseparable and mutually reinforcing 4Rs in the Global South and North.

The benefits from land recognition, redistribution, restitution, and regulation will only be short term, if production systems that are ecologically destructive and intentionally viable only for a small agrarian elite are not also transformed.

Democratizing land and territorial access without a regenerative agroecological transition will only sustain the problems we confront today. Conversely, an agroecological transition and food sovereignty are not possible without unified programs of land recognition, redistribution, and regulation.

As engaged scholars, we affirm our commitment to rigorous, evidence-based co-produced research that advances understanding of lives lived on the land. Our combined decades of work suggest that what counts as knowledge in elite political circles only serves to reinforce the dominance of top-down, technocratic, and market-based approaches to rural and urban development.

These approaches have not worked. Decades of technological modernization and agro-industrial intensification have resulted in poverty, inequality, land degradation and ecosystem destruction, land concentration, urban precarity, rural distress, and over- and under-nutrition.

We need a different path forward. We therefore stand with social movements calling for systemic transformation. We support just, equitable, and sustainable pathways for agrarian reform, transformation of the global food system, including urban agriculture, as a part of wider socioecological change. We call for the elimination of all forms of violence against rural working people and indigenous communities.

Making these visions a reality will require stronger national and international accountability than has been evident to date. We recognize the challenges posed by the current political moment, from the rise of the far right, fascism, militarism, xenophobia, and genocidal wars, such as those against the Palestinians, the Rohingyas, and the Kurds. We are experiencing a renewed period of colonial and imperialist offensives in Latin America, the Caribbean, and the Middle East. All these make the struggle for land more complex than ever.

International Academic Conference:

ICARRD+20 must give international commitments more teeth. We urge governments to ensure pro-poor agrarian reform, to respect and guarantee the protection of the territorial rights of indigenous peoples, Afrodescendant peoples, pastoralists, fisher peoples, and agrarian communities, and to ensure the principle of non-regression of acquired collective and territorial rights. This will mean democratizing the state and society more generally, which requires challenging structures of exploitation and oppression based on class and intersecting axes of social difference: gender, generation, race and ethnicity, caste, disability, nationality, and religion. We urge our governments to include in the FAO conference the need for and importance of following up on ICARRD+20, and to incorporate agrarian reforms into UN bodies, especially the FAO and its committee.

Land and territory for people, for work, for food, and for life is not a utopia, but a necessary and achievable solution to the multi-faceted crises evident today.

