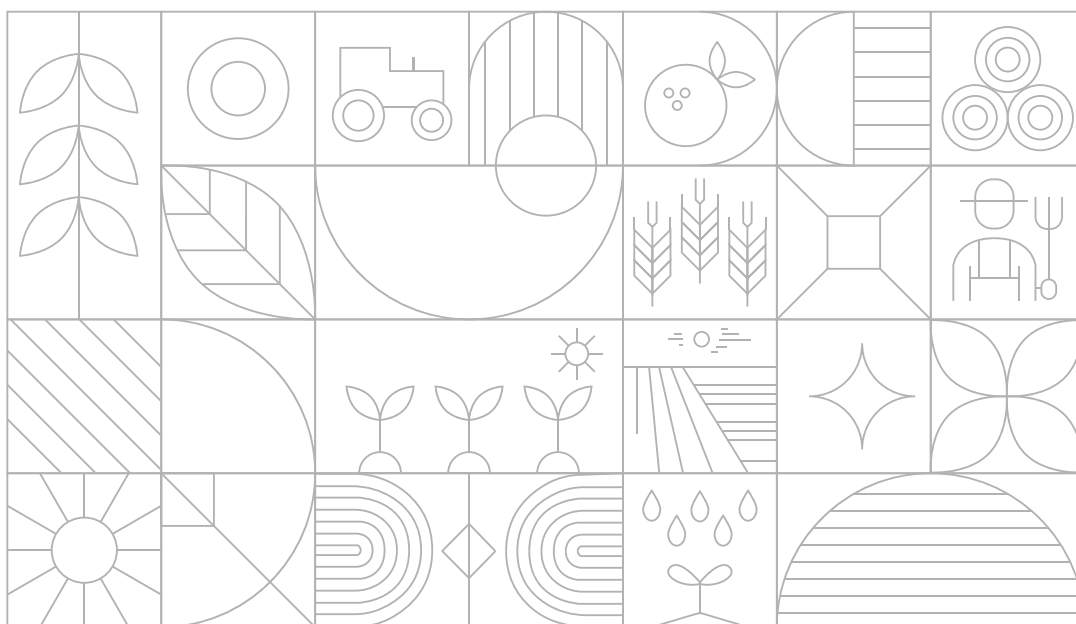


Land for life, land for peace

A cry from the Global South for integral agrarian reform



*Message from the Latin American and Caribbean
Episcopal Council (Celam) on the occasion of CIRADR+20*

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INTRODUCTION

For the Catholic Church, this conference (ICARRD+20) is not an isolated event. In Cali (COP16), the Churches of the Global South raised our voices for threatened biodiversity; in Belém (COP30), we demanded climate justice in the face of ecological debt. Today, we affirm that both struggles are fruitless unless we address their common root: fair access to land and rights of rural population. We are here to complete the circle because there can be no peace with nature without resolving the structural sin of territorial dispossession and denial of rights.

We have not constructed this roadmap in isolation. We walk alongside Indigenous, Afro-descendant, peasant and social movements. In their struggles we recognise the legitimate active resistance to dispossession and violation of rights of the people living and working in rural territories. Land governance cannot be designed behind closed doors; it must arise from a synodal listening and the active participation of those who put their bodies on the frontline for the defence of territories. Uniting our voice with that of popular movements and diverse communities that relate peacefully to the Earth is the only way to break political inertia.

Therefore, whilst agrarian history legitimately demanded “land to the tiller”, nowadays the planetary crisis compels us ethically and politically to demand “land for those who care for and inhabit it”. Productivity can no longer be measured by tonnes extracted from the Land, but by the capacity to cool the planet and regenerate life. Indigenous, Afro-descendant, pastoralist and peasant peoples are not merely producers; they are the guardians of the lungs that transform carbon dioxide and keep the world breathing.

THE CONTEXT: A BLEAK BALANCE

In Rome, in July 1979, took place the World Conference on Agrarian Reform and Rural Development. By then, the Catholic Magisterium had already clearly indicated the responsibility shared by all human beings for the under-nourishment of vast sectors of the population (John Paul II, 1979). Twenty-seven years later, in March 2006, the First International Conference on Agrarian Reform and Rural Development took place in Porto Alegre, attended by ninety-five countries.

In its final declaration, the Porto Alegre Conference underscored the importance of agrarian reform and rural development in making human rights a reality, reaching food security, eradicating poverty, strengthening social justice and promoting democratic principles. This first conference made evident the relationship between hunger, poverty and food insecurity, and the lack of access to land, water and the wealth offered by nature.

However, today the balance is bleak as we are witnessing forced de-ruralisation. This is not a natural migration; it is a systematic expulsion triggered by the expansion of the extractive frontier. The data is alarming. In this period, agricultural powerhouses such as Brazil saw their rural population fall to 11.2%, and Argentina to 7.5%. We have exchanged families for commodities, generating belts of misery in the cities and green deserts in the countryside.

We are witnessing a new “green” form of colonialism. Data reveals that 20% of large-scale land deals are now justified under environmental pretexts. We denounce the hypocrisy of a system that expels communities to create protected areas or carbon offset plantations. In other cases, foreign companies take control of territories and eliminate

the autonomy of local communities, sacrificing the guardians of the land on the altar of the “Net Zero” markets.

We are deeply concerned about the implementation of the “United Nations Decade of Family Farming” as well as the “United Nations *Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas*”. We see an unacceptable gap between diplomacy and territory. Many governments present impeccable reports to satisfy international protocol, whilst they dismantle the peasant economy and repeatedly undermine the land rights of Indigenous, Afro-descendant and pastoralist communities. If we do not close this rift, global institutions will become irrelevant to a rural population that can no longer feed itself on promises.

Severe deprivations disproportionately affect peasant, Indigenous and Afro-descendant communities, particularly women and other vulnerable members of these demographic sectors. However, such challenges can only be overcome through the broad participation of these groups in decision-making that translates into real power and concrete results. In this regard, gender issues must be given special consideration in order to achieve legislation that facilitates rural women’s access to land, inheritance, credit, markets, technology and information.

In its Technical Note for the 2006 Conference, the Catholic Church warned of the need to conserve and protect ecosystems as an expression of an adequate relationship between the land and those who cultivate it. Furthermore, it highlighted the importance of family, common, associative and cooperative forms of agricultural work for rural development, whilst reiterating its condemnation of the *latifundium* as an illegitimate form of property (Pontifical Council for “Justice and Peace”, 1997, 32).

By calling for an authentically human ecology, which integrates the inseparable spiritual and material dimensions of life, the Catholic Church emphasised the principles of subsidiarity, the common good and the universal destination of goods, as well as solidarity with the most needy. Since then, the Church has valued the cultural identity and spirituality of Indigenous communities as benchmarks for a harmonious relationship with the earth. Consequently, agrarian reform must guarantee their rights over the land and prevent any form of discrimination against Indigenous peoples, for authentic progress is that which allows each people to share their spiritual and material resources for the benefit of all (Benedict XVI, 2005).

Since 2006, there have been nine United Nations conferences on biodiversity and nineteen on climate change. On the occasion of the most recent Conference of the Parties to the Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP30), held in November 2025 in Belém do Pará, the Episcopal Conferences, Councils and continental associations of Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean jointly expressed their Call for Climate Justice and the Common Home.

Through this call for profound ecological conversion, inspired by the integral ecology advocated by the Magisterium of Francis and Leo XIV, the Catholic Church demanded equity in trade relations, which are marked by the ecological debt owed by the wealthiest economies to the countries of the Global South. She also demanded justice for communities most affected by an economy based on fossil fuels, through the imposition of higher levies on those who have profited from it; and the protection of ancestral peoples, as well as the ecosystems that serve as their habitat.

This joint ecclesial call urged compliance with the Paris Agreement (COP21) and proposed achieving zero deforestation by 2030. Furthermore, it called for the restoration of aquatic and terrestrial ecosystems. It also underscored the sacred character of indigenous territories, riparian biomes and oceanic ecosystems.

In addition to recognising the sovereignty of Indigenous peoples, peasants and artisanal fishers, the call emphasised the necessary promotion of family farming and cooperative structures to guarantee food security. It also demanded that nature be safeguarded from financial logic; and, given the need to overcome extractivism, it advocated for just energy transitions. Alongside this, it acknowledged the gravity of migration forced by climate change and the commodification of Land.

This Second International Conference on Agrarian Reform and Rural Development convened in Cartagena, twenty years after the one held in Porto Alegre, is of particular significance due to the increase in land ownership concentration. Among other threats, we currently face the expansion of extractivism through mining projects and monocultures, the progressive decline of the rural population, the reduction of agricultural, forestry and fishing activities, as well as the persecution and assassination of leaders, both men and women, who struggle for the defence of the Common Home in their territories. All this happens amid the climate change crisis, the devastation of nature, forced migration, urban overcrowding and the deterioration of food systems.

Faced with this bleak landscape, we at CELAM raise our cry so that the intrinsic and sacred value of the earth may be recognised by all humanity. Seeing and hearing the grave situation faced by peasant, Indigenous, Afro-descendant and traditional commu-

nities, particularly women, as well as male and female children, who are often the most affected people; we demand that human relationships with the earth be harmonious and oriented towards the promotion of life and peace.

We urgently demand full compliance with the United Nations *Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas* (2018) and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007). In addition to the general food security objectives of the The Overarching Goals of the Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests (2012), the actions of States and civil society must be geared towards fair access to land, sustainable use of soil and water, as well as the protection of the biodiversity of each ecosystem, ensuring the permanence of different forms of life on the planet. Only in this way will humanity achieve authentic rural development in every territory that provides the food necessary for the flourishing of its life.

This document begins by showing the prophetic dimension of the claim of the Churches from the Global South. Then, it sets forth some relevant theological and technical aspects for authentic rural development. Finally, it makes a call to the governments of the countries participating in this Second International Conference on Agrarian Reform and Rural Development.

LAND FOR THOSE WHO WORK AND CARE FOR IT

The publication of the encyclical letter *Laudato si'* marked a milestone in Catholic teaching due to its prophetic value and the broad acceptance it has received, far beyond ecclesial circles. By drawing attention to the urgency of the care we must show for our Common Home, Pope Francis warned that the weakest are those who suffer most from environmental and social degradation (Francis, 2015, 48).

The majority of the human population living in poverty is found in rural areas. However, the permanent threat to their lives posed by soil and water pollution (Francis, 2015, 48-49), as well as the accumulation of land ownership in a few hands (Francis, 2015, 134), seems to matter little to those whose decisions are guided solely by criteria of financial profitability.

We denounce the financialisation of creation. Land has been degraded from being our Mother to becoming an 'asset class'. The practice of *land banking* (accumulating land for future speculation without productive use) constitutes a structural sin and a flagrant violation of the universal destination of goods. This idolatry of the market expels entire communities merely to fatten investment portfolios. Land is for life and human dignity to flourish, not for the global financial casino.

Loss of biodiversity and lack of farmer control over the inputs for food production show that the mercantile logic has also perverted science. Technical development, which has historically served humanity by making food crops more resistant, has in recent decades deprived peasants of the seeds they require to cultivate the land and maintain their traditional way of life (Francis, 2015, 145). Among the negative results

of the introduction of genetically modified crops are the progressive concentration of land, the constant disappearance of small producers, migration from the countryside to the city (Francis, 2015, 134), as well as the multiplication of *latifundia* and monocultures (Francis, 2015, 129).

Furthermore, we alert against the digitalisation of dispossession. The imposition of digital land registries often erases the complex customary tenure rights of our peoples, reducing collective stewardship to a mere tradable digital title. Nor can we allow the thirst for energy and water of the new data centres and artificial intelligence infrastructures to compete with the thirst of our children and crops.

The apostolic exhortation *Dilexi te*, by Leo XIV, recalls that God revealed himself to Moses (Ex 3:7-8.10) as especially solicitous towards the needs of his most vulnerable children (Leo XIV, 2025, 8). By listening to the cry of the impoverished, the Church unites herself to that solicitude of God and responds to the millions of people who lack sufficient means of subsistence. Furthermore, she shares the anguish of so many Indigenous, Afro-descendant and peasant communities who see their traditional ways of relating to the land at risk.

The agenda proposed by the United Nations for 2030 includes ending hunger and poverty, as well as reducing inequalities. However, the commitment of national governments and the international community to combat the structural causes of poverty, inequality and the gaps between different sectors of the population has been insufficient.

The aim of improving labour, food and health conditions for the rural population implies a cultural change that transcends the simple accumulation of wealth or high levels of consumption as economic objectives (Leo XIV, 2025, 11). The achievement of these instrumental goals, attainable only by a few, comes at the detriment of the quality of life of vast sectors of the rural population.

In a world where the poor are increasingly numerous, the strongest economies favour certain wealthy elites whilst discarding the millions of people who die of hunger or are forced to migrate from their ancestral territories to avoid death. As Pope Leo XIV warns the Churches of the Global South: “We are particularly concerned about the grave conditions in which very many people find themselves due to a lack of food and water. Every day several thousand people die from causes linked to malnutrition” (Leo XIV, 2025, 12).

Among those who suffer the most deprivations are women, who in diverse contexts endure exclusion, mistreatment and violence that make it difficult for them to defend their rights and those of their children. Yet, “among them we constantly find the most

admirable gestures of everyday heroism in the defence and care of the fragility of their families” (Leo XIV, 2025, 12).

God is particularly concerned with those who are discriminated against and oppressed, asking us too, as his Church, for a firm and radical option in favour of the weakest. The struggle for rights to work and land, for the dignity of the poorest and weakest sectors, well expresses solidarity as a moral current that includes those who have been historically marginalised “in the construction of the common destiny” (Leo XIV, 2025, 81).

Although God has destined the Earth for the use and benefit of all (Leo XIV, 2025, 86), its illegitimate appropriation and the concentration of ownership in a few hands force smallholders, tenants and settlers to leave their plots, occupy protected territories or abandon agriculture to migrate and join the urban economy in precarious conditions. This concentration of private land ownership also severely affects Afro-descendant and Indigenous peoples, as well as pastoralist communities. The abandonment of land and community work in the countryside circularly increases the progressive concentration of land ownership.

Agrarian reform is not simply a new distribution of land. It must be accompanied by clear and equitable titling policies that recognize both individual and collective land rights, including Indigenous, pastoralist and customary tenure systems, as well as broad access to credit, sufficient public services, adequate infrastructure, technical assistance and training for sustainable agricultural productivity through technological innovation.

It must be borne in mind that food price policies often favour large producers and intermediaries, to the detriment of workers dedicated to small-scale cultivation. Moreover, the loss of harvests, due to climatic factors, effects derived from extractivism or unfavourable market conditions, leads small peasant producers into debt and, ultimately, to the loss of their plots.

Policies, norms and institutions for agrarian reform and rural development must respond to the demands of the population, which implies considering diverse economic, social, cultural, legal and ecological factors. The purpose of agricultural policies is to promote the availability of rural credit, insurance and technical assistance. Therefore, they will only be fair, effective and participatory if they enable the fulfillment of international commitments; without neglecting the rights of women, Indigenous peoples, pastoralist and customary communities, among other vulnerable social groups. Meeting national needs is the condition of possibility for fulfilling the international commitments acquired by the countries of the Global South.

The responsibility of States is a priority for the rural development of each nation, as capacity building, particularly through the promotion of health, education and infrastructure, favours the integration of rural areas into national development processes. The development of producer associations, family farming organisations and cooperatives of rural workers generates greater employment and income opportunities for the rural population. But it is not enough to facilitate an increase in agricultural productivity, as this must be environmentally sustainable and rely on equitable commercial mechanisms. Such conditions also involve the financial sector, as reducing banking costs for national and international transactions contributes to mobilising resources to strengthen rural development.

It is necessary to recognise the importance of rural and Indigenous communities, as well as traditional communities dedicated to forestry and fishing activities, in fostering food security and eradicating poverty. The participation of these populations in decision-making processes related to their territory must be guaranteed, and traditional small-scale economic practices must be valued.

TO TILL AND KEEP THE LAND



According to the first account of creation (Gn 1:1–2:4a), humanity is to have dominion (Gn 1:26,28b) over other animals and subdue the Earth (Gn 1:28a). Yet this mission does not consist in the instrumentalisation of nature, which in the long term would lead to its destruction and, consequently, to the self-destruction of humanity. Alongside the divine desire for humanity to lead the other animal creatures (Gn 1:26), according to this same narrative, God has set plants to serve humanity and other species as food (Gn 1:29-30).

The second account of creation (Gn 2:4b–3:24), the origin of which is closer to rural life, explains that Adam was placed in the Garden of Eden to till it and keep it. The linguistic parallel in this narrative clearly points out that human beings are earth. We are dust of the ground, *adamah* (Gn 2:7), that very same Earth we must till and keep (Gn 2:15).

Faced with the risk of losing land and liberty through indebtedness, the Covenant Code (Ex 22:24), the Levitical legislation (Lv 25:36-37), and the Deuteronomic laws (Dt 15:7-8; 23:20) coincided in prohibiting exploitation amongst members of the people of Israel. In Deuteronomy, lending is viewed as a form of dominion between peoples, making the words addressed by YHWH to Israel revealing: “You shall lend to many nations, but you shall not borrow; you shall rule over many nations, but they shall not rule over you” (Dt 15:6). Recourse to loans was to be avoided precisely because of the eventual risk of losing land and freedom; for this reason, the *go’el* or redemption was established in Israel. This tribal institution intended that land ownership should remain amongst members of the same family and that no Israelite should be enslaved forever.

The Covenant Code already established the restitution of individual property every seven years (Dt 15:1); yet it maintained a distinction regarding the pressure that could be exerted upon a foreigner (Dt 15:2-3). Often, the children of debtors were taken as pledges and converted into slaves (2 Kgs 4:1; Neh 5:5) or the debtors themselves had to serve their creditor whilst waiting to return to freedom in the Sabbatical year (Dt 15:12; Lv 25:39). Upon the arrival of that Sabbatical year, Hebrew men and women were to be redeemed with livestock or agricultural produce for their sustenance in a life of freedom (Ex 21:2; Dt 15:12). Every seven years, the fields with their vineyards and olive groves were to be left fallow so that the land could rest, such that its fruits might serve as food for the impoverished and for the animals (Ex 23:10-11; Lv 25:3-5).

The precept of rest every seven days—that is, on the Shabbat—included field workers, their slaves and their working animals (Ex 23:12). This figure of priestly origin was combined with that of the Sabbatical year—of land repose and the liberation of slaves—to count seven weeks of years (Lv 25:8) and thus proclaim the Jubilee year every fifty years. The arrival of the Jubilee signalled that insolvent debtors were pardoned, slaves redeemed and lands left in repose to return to their original owners.

Beyond the endogamous character of this tradition, the second chapter of *Laudato si'* underscores the value of such legislation in combating expropriation, pauperisation, slavery amongst Israelites and the over-exploitation of the land. At the end of that second chapter, dedicated to the Gospel of Creation, Pope Francis turns to the Pauline tradition to signal that the mystery of Christ stands at the origin of creation and also at its fullness. If all things were created through him and for him (Col 1:16), God reveals his love more clearly as reconciliation than in his creative activity itself.

The poverty suffered by millions of people in the world and the environmental degradation of our Common Home are the result of sin, *hamartia*, which is the human source of curses for all creation (Gn 3:17) and brings death to all humanity (Rm 5:12). However, beyond the law, Christ as the new Adam has brought superabundant grace for all humanity (Rm 5:15) and for creation, which groans in labour pains awaiting the revealing of the children of God (Rm 8:19-22).

The spirit of the Risen One works in every human being to open them to transcendence through a love conducive to reconciliation or *katallagé* (2 Cor 5:18). This universal reconciliation consists of reorienting human activity through the gratuitous justification that surpasses sin and brings justice to the present world (Rm 3:24-26). By subjecting —*ypotássomai*— all creation to the Son, he will be subjected to God, and with him all things, “so that God may be all in all” (1 Cor 15:28).

It is thus that the Christian experience appropriates the Hebrew tradition of the liberating and creator God. Transformed by grace, persons assume the solidarity and merciful praxis of Jesus to allow God to love through them. In this consists the liberation of creation subjected to slavery by human sin (Rm 8:20). The cry of creation and the cry of suffering people converge (Rm 8:22-23) in the hope of a new world animated by the Spirit who transforms the relationships of humanity with creation and of human beings with one another.

The CELAM value the efforts to counteract land concentration in each country and advocate for the implementation of agrarian reform through dialogue leading to agreement between governments and all sectors of civil society. Legitimate property titling and access to credit prevent the over-exploitation of land motivated by the desire for immediate profitability. Transparent registration, land surveying, and the issuing of property titles can improve the legal, institutional, and market foundations for the customary use of land and water in favour of the common good.

Furthermore, agrarian reform in every nation must take into account the preservation and conservation of land, water and natural wealth, for these represent vital resources for all human groups, especially for nomadic peoples and those dedicated to pastoralism, whose cultures are at grave risk.

The struggle for control of resources is a source of territorial conflict, political instability and environmental degradation. Conversely, the dialogue, the exchange of information, capabilities and experience are fundamental elements for rural development and the diffusion of agrarian reform policies throughout the world.

The biblical tradition is unequivocal: land is not an absolute commodity, but a gift held in trust. The Genesis mandate to 'till and keep' (Gn 2:15) establishes an ethical limit to ownership. There is no legitimate dominion if it destroys the regenerative capacity of the soil. Therefore, the laws of the biblical Jubilee are not merely pious suggestions, but mandatory mechanisms of economic correction to prevent the perpetuation of inequality. 'Agrarian Reform' is the modern name for that necessary Jubilee: an act of restitution to heal the broken social and ecological fabric.

In addition, current climate science confirms what ancestral wisdom already knew: diversity is the guarantee of life. Extensive monocultures are vulnerable to climate change, and their dependence on fossil inputs makes them net carbon emitters. In contrast to this, peasant and family farming, by integrating crops, trees, and animals, converts agriculture into a carbon sink. Redistributing land is not only social justice; it is the most efficient and cost-effective technology we possess to mitigate global warming.

FROM DIAGNOSIS TO BINDING GOVERNANCE

The CELAM have come to ICARRD+20 to demand binding public policies. For the transition to be just, we demand five immediate structural changes:

I. Agricultural policies must be designed by peasants, pastoral communities and Indigenous peoples, including women. Furthermore, their implementation must be led by these sectors to guarantee their real power that allows them to establish priorities, propose solutions and promote the necessary transformations in their territories.

II. There must be global regulations compelling companies to be accountable for the integral well-being of the territory, not merely for the carbon footprint resulting from their merchandise. Private profitability cannot externalise its costs onto the destruction of the community social fabric.

III. Enough of measuring success by effort or allocated budgets. There must be physical metrics of agrarian justice. It is need to know how many hectares have actually been redistributed into peasant hands each year, how much has the volume of local food in territorial markets grown and who needs which land to meet their basic livelihoods and live with dignity. An audit of land, not of intentions, is required to give priority to those most need in the redistribution processes.

IV. Governments must stop viewing land and agrarian reform as an ideology of the past, and adopt it as the most efficient tool for the climatic future. In the effort for cooling the planet, financing land titling for Indigenous, Afro-descendant, pastoralist and peasant communities is cheaper and more effective than costly carbon capture technologies.

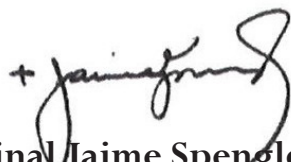
V. Funds for climate and biodiversity must reach those who care for the land without intermediaries. Currently, financial bureaucracy consumes resources before they touch the ground. We demand direct transfer mechanisms to the territorial organisations of peasants and rural workers that guarantee food sovereignty.

TILLING FOR HOPE

We do not close this message with the pessimism of those who watch history pass by, but with the stubborn hope of those who inhabit, till and care for the soil. The agrarian reform we demand is not merely a technical adjustment; it is the reconstruction of the covenant between humanity and the Creator.

We must break the padlock that currently keeps our youth from the land. Speculation has made land so expensive that it prevents young peasants from inheriting plots, or makes it impossible for future generations of Indigenous people and pastoralists to continue practising their ways of life and caring for the land. Yet we affirm that there is no future without them. We refuse to condemn our rural youth to forced migration; we claim their right to remain and thrive.

To the peasant families, indigenous peoples and Afro-descendant communities who have sustained life amidst the storms of dispossession: do not faint. You are the true protagonists of this story and the Church walks with you, not ahead or behind, but beside you: muddying our feet in the same furrow. Let us leave Cartagena with the certainty that every hectare redistributed is a victory over death, and every seed protected is a vote for the future. The harvest of justice will not wait; the time to sow it is now.



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