



John Kania, Kat Allen & Marc Van Ameringen

Channeling Change: Making Collective Impact Work

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Plot of Land, a Path to Freedom

A valuable lesson for alleviating global poverty lies within the pages of African American history.

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Jack Foreman was among the wealthiest men in the West during the 1890s. He had his own private railroad, herds of cattle, and a lucrative deal with the Kansas City Southern Railroad company. But what makes him so remarkable is that Forman was born an African American slave.

Many of the details of his life have been lost to history, but it would be a shame if the lessons embodied by his success followed the same path. Because though torn from the pages of African American history more than a century ago, his success spotlights a crucial lesson for today's efforts to address global poverty.

Foreman's story turns on the accident of his birthplace. He was born into a slave family on Cherokee Territory and as a result of a treaty between the US and the Cherokee tribe, was entitled to claim vacant land upon gaining his freedom at the close of the civil war. This opportunity for land ownership was denied to the vast majority of the other four million freed slaves across the South when the promised "40 acres and a mule" plan was scrapped.

Henry Louis Gates and Dalton Conley have long associated the failure to grant freed slaves their "40 acres and a mule" with the persistent wealth and multi-faceted socio-economic gap between black and white America.

Now an analysis of census data by economist Melinda Miller further highlights this missed opportunity by making clear that land ownership provided a key foundation for former slaves in Cherokee territory to bootstrap themselves out of poverty.

The impact was profound, Ms. Miller has found. Freed blacks in Cherokee territory who obtained farmland were better educated, more likely to own their own home, and make investments in whatever property they did own, than freed blacks across the South who did not have claim to land.

Land ownership or the absence of it, helped determine the trajectory of not only these individuals but also the history of our nation. And it continues to exert this power around the world.

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Consider this: the vast majority of the world’s one billion poorest citizens share two key traits. They depend on agriculture to survive, and yet they don’t have legal rights to the land they till.

These landless poor are often trapped in positions that should sound familiar to anyone with even rudimentary knowledge of African American history. They are often sharecroppers, indentured servants, or day laborers.

In Pakistan, millions of *haari*, or landless peasants, have no ability to negotiate a fair salary from their often-exploitative employers. In India, millions labor in fields owned by others for pennies a day. In rural Africa, at least **428 million people** are vulnerable to being pushed off their land by stronger neighbors or—increasingly—**outside investors**, because they have no rights to their land.

While 40 acres and a mule are no longer feasible given current population densities and budgetary concerns, Foreman’s path out of poverty is no less valid.

Africa’s farming families can be provided with formal rights to the government land they currently till in ways that are market-friendly.

In countries such as Pakistan, where there are large numbers of completely landless laborers in agriculture, there is often also government-owned land that can be divided into small plots and transferred to these poor families. Where appropriate public land does not exist, private land can be purchased on the market.

Our research shows that owning a patch of land as small as one-tenth an acre (about the size of a tennis court) can provide benefits to completely landless families. In India, these **micro-plots** have been successful in allowing thousands of families to send their children to school, negotiate fair wages, and grow a kitchen garden. Such programs should be replicated and expanded.

With technical and financial assistance, governments can expeditiously and inexpensively develop their own solutions to ensure that poor families gain legal control over land to break entrenched poverty cycles.

A good example of this is in Rwanda. With the help of experts on loan from Britain and the US (including my organization), the Rwandan government drafted new land policy and laws, launching the process of formalizing farmers’ legal claims to land. The farmers we’ve visited are now investing their labor and money to improve their land and seeing their harvests grow.

So as we celebrate African American History month, let’s pause to consider the lessons learned. Having failed to act during the critical window of opportunity—when we were still an agrarian nation where opportunity and wealth were closely tied to land—the US must now wrestle with a far harder proposition: how to provide meaningful opportunity to a largely dispossessed underclass. But we can make our current global development investments and interventions more effective by ensuring that the still largely agrarian developing world seizes the opportunity to address one of the root causes of the poverty trap: landlessness.



Tim Hanstad is president and CEO of **Landesa** (@Landesa_Global), a global development nonprofit that works to secure land rights for the world’s poor.

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