

*The Long Agrarian Reform: The Social and Environmental Consequences of Agrarian Modernization in Guatemala*

By Patrick Chassé

The 1952 Agrarian Reform Law transformed Guatemalan agriculture, society and the environment for decades, though not in the way its planners intended. In 1944, Guatemalan policymakers initiated an agrarian modernization project that sought to reduce the state's dependence on coffee exports and ensure food was more affordable for peasants and workers. Extension agents worked with landowners, peasants and indigenous communities to promote new exports like cotton and introduce new agricultural technologies including mechanization, hybridized seeds, and fertilizers. The apex of the modernization project was the 1952 Agrarian Reform Law that redistributed underutilized land from large landowners to peasant farmers. Though the Reform was largely successful, it was reversed by conservative opponents after the 1954 coup. However, the transfer of land between radically different agro-ecological regimes—peasant and large landowner—transformed the rural landscape for generations. Successive governments embraced the technical innovations introduced during the Revolution, but dispensed with the financial and technical support offered to peasants. On the Pacific Coast, industrial-scale cotton cultivation expanded rapidly, destroying forested land and displacing peasants. In the Highlands, peasants had to supplement their meagre corn harvests with seasonal migration to coastal plantations. The shortage of land and rapid population growth led to deforestation, soil exhaustion and declining corn yields across the Highlands which contributed to food scarcity and growing malnutrition. Drawing on Ministry of Agriculture records and US government reports, I argue that the Agrarian Reform catalyzed social and environment changes that were pivotal in Guatemala's transformation into a highly productive and exploitative agro-exporter.