

# Food Sovereignty and Alternative Paradigms to Confront Land Grabbing and the Food and Climate Crises

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**ABSTRACT** *In the contemporary world we face a systemic crisis where multiple dimensions converge, including an economic crisis, a financial crisis, a climate crisis, an energy crisis, a food crisis, and runaway land grabbing. Peter Rosset argues for a paradigm shift toward food sovereignty based on genuine agrarian reform and sustainable peasant agriculture, which he sees as the only way to address the multiple crises.*

**KEYWORDS** *La Via Campesina; food sovereignty; food crisis; agrarian reform*

## **Introduction: A world facing multiple crises**

In the contemporary world we are facing a systemic crisis where multiple dimensions converge. There is a convergence of an economic, a financial, a climate, an energy and a food crisis, and all are manifestations of medium- to long-term trends in global capitalism. Underlying this is a long-term crisis of access to land by food producing rural people (Rosset, 2006a, b; De Schutter, 2010), and the recent surge in land grabbing by foreign capital (Zoomers, 2010).

In the past few years, we have witnessed the explosion of mining concessions, petroleum exploration, bioprospecting, large-scale logging, eco- and adventure-tourism investment, large infrastructure projects (dams, ports, airports, economic development zones, highways, etc.), agrofuel plantations, carbon-credit plantations, paper-pulp plantations, food plantations for export to wealthy food deficit countries, and other old and modern forms of land grabbing through concessions, rentals, forced sales, and outright theft (Rosset, 2009c; Zoomers, 2010). Almost all of this has come at the expense of local communities of peasants, indigenous people, pastoralists, potential agrarian reform beneficiaries, artisanal fisherfolk, etc., who have progressively lost their land and territories or at least become engaged in protracted struggles to defend them, typically becoming the victims of the criminalization of social protest and rampant militarization of rural areas (Rosset, 2009c).

In addition to these assaults on land and territory, the food price crisis is partially a product of the long-term undermining of the food production capacity of family farm

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and peasant agriculture due to neo-liberal policies, which have shifted state support toward boosting the productive capacity of agroexport elites and agribusiness (Rosset, 2006b). The climate crisis is beginning to affect both the livelihoods of rural people and food production. As the climate changes and becomes more unpredictable, farmers have to face shifting planting dates, drought in the rainy season, torrential rains and floods in the dry season, increased average temperatures and aridity, and ever more extreme climate events like hurricanes, monsoons, and extreme droughts (FAO, 2010). Peasant farmers are then doubly victimized, as the false solutions to the climate crisis like agrofuels and carbon credits generate still more land grabbing, evictions, and displacement.

Faced with these multiple crises, it is important to collectively seek solutions. In the following, I outline several interrelated alternative paradigms.

### Food sovereignty

In country after country, the proportion of food coming from the small farm sector is far greater than – typically more than double – the proportion of land that is actually in the hands of small farmers.<sup>1</sup> These farmers are over-represented in food production and under-represented in export and agrofuel production, because they have a *food-producing vocation*. Yet, the continued growth of the dominant model directly undermines food production, driving small farmers off the land and into migrant streams.

In order to reverse these trends and provide a life with dignity for farming people, protect rural environments, and correct the structural causes of the food crisis, we need to revitalize family and peasant farming. That means restoring the public sector rural budgets that were cut under neo-liberal policies, restore minimum price guarantees, credit and other forms of support, and carry out redistributive agrarian reform. The peasant and family farm sectors in most countries cannot be rebuilt without land reform, which redistributes land from export elites to food producing peasants and family farmers. This is a central pillar of the alternative proposal for our food and agriculture

systems, as put forth by the international farmers' movement.

Many of the world's organizations of family farmers, peasants, the landless, rural workers, indigenous people, rural youth, and rural women have joined together in global alliance, the La Via Campesina.<sup>2</sup> According to La Via Campesina, we are facing an historic clash between two models of economic, social, and cultural development for the rural world; and La Via Campesina has proposed an alternative policy paradigm called *food sovereignty* (La Via Campesina and People's Food Sovereignty Network, 2006; Rosset, 2006a, b). Food sovereignty starts with the concept of economic and social human rights, which include the right to food, but it goes further, arguing that there is a corollary right to land and a 'right to produce' for rural peoples.

Food sovereignty argues that feeding a nation's people is an issue of national security – of sovereignty, if you will. If the population of a country must depend for their next meal on the vagaries and price swings of the global economy, on the goodwill of a superpower not to use food as a weapon, on the unpredictability and high cost of long-distance shipping, then that country is not secure, neither in the sense of national security nor in the sense of food security. Food sovereignty thus goes beyond the concept of food security, which says nothing about where the food comes from or how it is produced. To achieve genuine food sovereignty, people in rural areas must have access to productive land and receive prices for their crops that allow them to make a decent living, while feeding their nation's people.

But it also means that access to land and productive resources is not enough. The current emphasis in trade negotiations on market access for exports, to the detriment of protection of domestic markets for domestic producers, is a critical problem. According to La Via Campesina, 'food sovereignty gives priority of market access to local producers. Liberalized agricultural trade, which gives access to markets on the basis of market power and low, often subsidized, prices, denies local producers access to their own markets,'<sup>3</sup> and thus violates the right to produce, while undercutting local and regional economic development.

One way to promote local economic development in rural areas is to recreate local circuits of production and consumption, where family farmers sell their produce in local towns and villages, and buy other necessities from artisans and merchants in those towns. As been clearly demonstrated in a recent landmark study in Brazil, the presence of agrarian reform settlements, as a result of land occupations by peasant movements, boost local economies, even when a country lacks a comprehensive agrarian reform policy (Heredia *et al.*, 2006).

Only by changing development tracks from the export-led, free trade-based, industrial agriculture model of large farms, land concentration, and displacement of people, can we stop the downward spiral of poverty, low wages, rural-urban migration, environmental degradation, and food crisis. Redistributive land reform and a reversal of dominant trade policies hold the promise of change toward a smaller farm, family-based or cooperative model, with the potential to feed people, lead to broad-based economic development, and conserve biodiversity and productive resources. In this context, it is useful to review current developments in agrarian reform.

### **Agrarian reform as part of food sovereignty**

#### ***On-going agrarian reforms: the 'official' reforms***

For the past decade or more, the World Bank has been taking the lead in promoting, and in some cases financing, comprehensive 'reforms' of land tenure, including titling, ownership mapping and land registries, land market facilitation, market-assisted or negotiated redistributive reforms, and credit, technical assistance and marketing support. While they call this 'land reform', they are privatizing land and transforming it from a collective right of rural people into a commodity that is bought and sold, where money is the key to access to land. In this policy environment, national, and regional institutions – including governments, aid agencies, and other development banks – are following the lead of the World

Bank and aggressively implementing some, or in some cases, all of these reforms (Rosset *et al.*, 2006 Part II).

The Bank's land policies largely fail to address the underlying causes of poverty and exclusion because of their market-based methods and in many cases have made things worse. Land titling programmes can lead to new land loss, as in Thailand, where people who had enjoyed continuous access to land for generations suddenly lost it when given saleable titles in the midst of a national economic crisis, or to conflicts, as in Mexico, where the demarcation of private parcels on what was once a collective land, has produced violent conflicts between neighbours, where peaceful coexistence was once the norm. Furthermore, supposed beneficiaries of Bank-funded land credits are strapped with heavy debts for expensive land of dubious quality as in Guatemala and Brazil. Worst of all, market-based 'solutions' tend to depoliticize the problem of landlessness, which by its nature can only be resolved by structural changes of a kind that can only be addressed in the sphere of politics, rather than the market. Finally, these 'reforms' leave intact the neo-liberal policy environment and its underlying model, both inimical to family agriculture. We can hope for little positive change, then, from these efforts (Rosset *et al.*, 2006).

#### ***On-going agrarian reforms: state-led land reforms***

'In every Latin American case where significant land redistribution benefiting the rural poor took place, the state played a decisive role', wrote the late land reform theorist Solon Barraclough (1999). Unfortunately, as he also pointed out, in every case where reform was denied or deformed, the state also played a critical role.

On the positive side, progressive governments in Venezuela, Bolivia, Cuba, Ecuador, Paraguay, and Nepal have all made commitments to take further steps in already well-advanced reforms (i.e., Cuba), or to develop new ones.

Since the 1990s, Cuba has been carrying out new stages of its revolutionary agrarian reform. This is both an example of how a nation is trying

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to overcome the food crisis by promoting repeasantization via agrarian reform, and is an important case of the complementary nature of such an agrarian reform with sustainable peasant agriculture, in the form of a national social movement to promote agroecology. The combination is helping boost national food production and construct food sovereignty (Alvarez *et al.*, 2006; Machín Sosa *et al.*, 2010; Rosset *et al.*, 2011).

The cases of Venezuela and Bolivia, on the other hand, are very promising but still very much up in the air (Wilpert, 2006; Gascón and Montagut, 2010). While the governments of Presidents Chavez and Morales have made clear their commitment to agrarian reform, a number of factors have so far conspired to keep progress uneven at best (Wilpert, 2006). These include the resistance of landlords and bureaucrats, a slow response to the dumping effects of massive food imports, and the relative lack of organization of the peasantry into an actor in the case of Venezuela, or at least active subject, to push land reform. In Bolivia, landlords are actively and violently resisting Evo Morales' 'agrarian revolution' with overt and covert support from the United States.

### **Land reform from below**

The majority of the countries in the world do not enjoy governments' committed to state-led redistribution of land based on expropriation, with or without compensation to former landowners. This is the fundamental cause behind the phenomenal rise in land occupations and reclamations – land reform from below – being carried by a new generation of sophisticated social movements around the world.

In Indonesia, some 1 million hectares of land have been occupied by landless peasants since the end of the Suharto dictatorship. Of this land, approximately 50 percent land was formerly held in tree crop plantations (such as rubber or oil palm), 30 percent was in corporate timber plantations, and the remainder was a mixture of state-owned land and tourism development areas. About three-quarters of the occupations have been reclamations of land previously occupied decades ago by the same villages before they

were displaced, often violently, to make way for plantations; the other one-quarter have been for new occupations. This is a positive development that stands in marked contrast to recent government-assisted, massive corporate land grabs to plant oil palm for agrofuel exports, which are generating new land conflicts (Rosset *et al.*, 2006: 221–24).

In Zimbabwe, as many as 11 million hectares have been transferred in recent years in large part due to government-supported occupations by black war veterans of large, white-owned estates. While a lot of controversy exists over how much land went to political cronies, there is a little doubt that a major, world-class transfer of assets to poor people occurred, even if the government participated for the wrong political reasons (Mamdani, 2008). In Brazil, according to the Landless Workers' Movement (MST), by 2002 some 8 million hectares of land have been occupied and settled by some 1 million people newly engaged in farming. Other countries with escalating land occupations include Paraguay, Bolivia, Nicaragua, Argentina, Honduras, Guatemala, Mexico, India, Thailand, South Africa, and others (Rosset *et al.*, 2006: 221–24).

This tactic of land occupation is one of the central tactics in the contemporary struggle for land reform. The MST has set the standard for other landless people's movements around the world. They are noted for both their success in occupying land – as measured by the amount of land occupied, the number of people settled, and a rate of abandonment of the settlements, which remains well below 10 percent of new settlers – as well as for the sophisticated nature of their internal organization. The MST uses a two-step method to move people from extreme poverty into landownership and farming. They begin by reaching out to the most excluded and impoverished segments of Brazilian society, such as landless rural day labourers, urban homeless people, people with substance abuse problems, unemployed rural slum dwellers, or peasant farmers who have lost their land. Organizers give talks in community centers, churches, and other public forums, and landless families are given the opportunity to sign up for a land occupation.

Step one sees these families move into rural 'camps', where they live on the side of highways in shacks made from black plastic, until a suitable estate – typically land left unused by absentee landlords – is found. Families spend at least six months, and sometimes as long as five years, living under the harsh conditions of the camps, with little privacy, enduring heat in the summer and cold in the rainy season. As the MST discovered almost by accident, however, the camps are the key step in forging new people out of those with tremendous personal issues to overcome. Camp discipline that is communally imposed by camp members, prohibits drug use, domestic violence, excessive drinking, and a host of other social ills. All families must help look after each other's children – who play together – and everyone must cooperate in communal duties. People learn to live cooperatively, and they receive intensive training in literacy, public health, farming, administration of co-ops, and other key skills that can make their future farm communities successful. When people used to occupy land directly, they usually failed to stay more than few months. But when they have first been through an MST camp, more than 90 percent of them stay on their land long term.

Step two is the actual land occupation. It usually takes place at dawn, when security guards and police are asleep, and it involves anywhere from dozens to thousands of families rapidly moving out of their camp onto the estate they will occupy. Crops are planted immediately, communal kitchens, schools, and a health clinic are set up, and defense teams trained in non-violence secure the perimeter against the hired gunmen, thugs, and assorted police forces that the landlord usually calls down upon them. The actual occupation leads to a negotiation with local authorities, the result of which may be the expropriation (with compensation) of the property under Brazil's constitutional provision requiring the social use of land, or the negotiated exchange of the occupied parcel for a different one of equal value. In some cases security forces have managed to expel the occupiers, who typically return and occupy the parcel again and again until an accommodation is reached.

### **The case for redistributive land reform<sup>4</sup>**

The redistribution of land can fulfil a number of functions in more sustainable models of development. Among them are poverty reduction, economic development, food production, and environmental stewardship. Today, we have a new opportunity to learn the lessons of past reforms and apply them to the practical goals of development. Land reform is back on the agenda, thanks to the grassroots movements, the progressive governments, and the food crisis. Here, we look at the important roles redistributive land reform can play in the move towards more sustainable development.

### ***Land reform and poverty***

History shows that the redistribution of land to landless and land-poor rural families can be a very effective way to improve rural welfare. In the outcome of virtually every land reform programme carried out in the Third World since World War II, we can distinguish between what I call 'radical' re-distribution or 'genuine land reform', and 'non-egalitarian' reforms or 'fake land reform'. When quality land was really distributed to the poor, and the power of the rural oligarchy to distort and 'capture' policies broken, real, measurable poverty reduction and improvement in human welfare has invariably been the result. Japan, South Korean, Taiwan, Cuba, and China are all good examples. In contrast, countries with reforms that gave only poor quality land to beneficiaries, and/or failed to alter the rural power structures that work against the poor, have failed to make a major dent in rural poverty or food production.

Successful reforms trigger relatively broad-based economic development. By including the poor in economic development, they build domestic markets to support national economic activity. The often tragic outcome of failed reforms is to condemn the supposed beneficiaries to further marginalization from national economic life, as they frequently assume heavy debts to pay for the poor quality land they receive in remote locations, without credit or access to markets, and in policy environments hostile to small farmers.

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More recently, it turns out that people in land reform settlements in Brazil earn more than they did before, and that landless families still do – they eat better, they have greater purchasing power, they have greater access to educational opportunities, and they are more likely to be able to unite their families in one place rather than lose family members to migration. In fact, land reform has become a means to stem the rural-urban migration that is causing Third World cities to grow beyond the capacity of urban economies to provide enough jobs.

Another way of looking at it is in terms of the cost of creating new jobs. Estimates of the cost of creating a job in the commercial sector of Brazil range from 2 to 20 times more than the cost of establishing an unemployed head of household on farm land through agrarian reform. Land reform beneficiaries in Brazil have an annual income equivalent to 3.7 minimum wages, while still landless labourers average only 0.7 of the minimum. Infant mortality among families of beneficiaries has dropped to only half of the national average.

This provides a powerful argument for land reform: to create a small farm economy is not only good for local economic development, but is also more effective social policy rather than driving the poor out of rural areas and into burgeoning cities. Only land reform holds the potential to address chronic underemployment in most Third World countries. Because small farms use more labour – and often less capital – to farm a given unit of area, a small farm model can absorb far more people into gainful activity and reverse the stream of out-migration from rural areas.

### ***Land reform and productivity***

In the past, there was a longstanding debate concerning the likely impacts of the redistribution of farm land to the poor, which almost inevitably leads on the average to smaller production units. One concern was that when freed from exploitative share-cropping, rental or labour relationships, the poor would retain a greater proportion of their own production for their own consumption,

which is not necessarily a bad thing, but leads to a net decrease in food availability for other consumers. However, this argument has been put to rest by evidence and by the productivity gains that can be achieved by shifting to smaller-scale, more intensive styles of production.

In Brazil, family farm agriculture produces 24 percent of the total national value of production of beef, 24 percent of milk, 58 percent of pork, and 40 percent of poultry and eggs. It also generates 33 percent of cotton, 31 percent of rice, 72 percent of onions, 67 percent of green beans, 97 percent of tobacco, 84 percent of cassava, 49 percent of maize, 32 percent of soya, 46 percent of wheat, 58 percent of bananas, 27 percent of oranges, 47 percent of grapes, 25 percent of coffee, and 10 percent of sugar. In total, family farm agriculture accounts for 40 percent of the total national value of production, while occupying just 30.5 percent of the cultivated land area. They generate fully 76.9 percent of the national employment in agriculture, all while receiving only 25.3 percent of farm credit.

In fact, data shows that small farms almost always produce far more agricultural output per unit area than larger farms and do so, more efficiently. This holds true for both industrial countries and any country in the Third World. This is widely recognized by agricultural economists as the 'inverse relationship between farm size and output'. When I examined the relationship between farm size and total output for 15 countries in the Third World, in all cases, relatively smaller farm sizes were much more productive per unit area – two to ten times more productive – than larger ones (Rosset, 1999). Thus, redistributive land reform is not likely to run at cross-purposes with productivity concerns.

In farming communities dominated by large corporate farms, nearby towns died off. Mechanization meant that fewer local people were employed, and absentee ownership meant that farm families themselves were no longer to be found. In these corporate-farm towns, the income earned in agriculture was drained off into larger cities to support distant enterprises, while in towns surrounded by family farms, the income circulated among local business establishments,

generating jobs and community prosperity. Where family farms predominated, there were more local businesses, paved streets and sidewalks, schools, parks, churches, clubs, and newspapers, better services, higher employment, and more civic participation. Studies conducted since Goldschmidt's original work confirms that his findings remain true today.

It is clear that local and regional economic development can benefit from a small farm economy, as can the life and prosperity of rural towns. But what of national economic development? History has shown us that a relatively equitable, small farmer-based rural economy provides the basis for strong national economic development. This 'farmer road to development' is part of the reason why, for example, the Northern United States early in its history developed more rapidly and evenly than did Latin America, with its inequitable land distribution characterized by huge haciendas and plantations interspersed with poverty-stricken subsistence farmers. In the early decades of the Northern United States (in contrast to the plantation system in the South), independent 'yeoman' farmers formed a vibrant domestic market for manufactured products from urban areas, including farm implements, clothing, and other necessities. This domestic demand fuelled economic growth in the urban areas, and the combination gave rise to broad-based growth.

The post-war experiences of Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan in the capitalist world, and China, Cuba and more recently, Vietnam, in the socialist world, also demonstrate how equitable land distribution fuels economic development. At the end of the Second World War, circumstances including devastation and foreign occupation conspired to create the conditions for 'radical' land reforms in the former countries – while revolutions did the same in the latter – breaking the economic stranglehold of the landholding class over rural economic life. Combined with trade protection to keep farm prices high and targeted investment in rural areas, farm families rapidly achieved a high level of purchasing power, which guaranteed domestic markets for fledging industries.

The post-war economic 'miracles' of these three capitalist countries were each fuelled at the start by internal markets centred in rural areas, long before the advent of the much heralded 'export orientation' policies which later pushed those industries to compete in the global economy. This was a real triumph for 'bubble-up' economics, in which redistribution of productive assets to the poorest strata of society created the economic basis for rapid, relatively inclusive development. While this analysis in no way is meant to suggest that all policies pursued by these countries were positive, or should be blindly replicated, their experience does stand in stark contrast to the failure of 'trickle down' economics to achieve much of anything in the same time period in areas of US dominance, including much of Latin America. More generally, there is now a growing consensus among mainstream development economists, long called for by many in civil society, that inequality in asset distribution impedes economic growth.

A key distinction is between 'transformative' agrarian reforms and others (Sobhan, 1993). In most redistributive reforms, those who actually receive land are at least nominally better off than those who remain landless – unless and until policies inimical to small farm agriculture lead them to lose their land once again. However, certain agrarian reforms have been the key step in allowing entire nations to change development tracks. In these cases countries have 'jumped' from the excluding, downward spiral into poverty and environmental degradation, to the upward spiral of broad-based improvements in living standards producing strong internal markets, which in turn lead to more dynamic and inclusive economic development – the pattern followed in Japan, South Korea, China, Taiwan, and elsewhere. Comparative analysis reveals what these transformative reforms, those that led to real social transitions, had in common. In brief, the majority of the landless and land poor benefited, the majority of the arable land was affected, the stranglehold of entrenched power structures over rural life and economy was broken, and favourable, enabling economic policies were put in place. A key feature of the more successful reforms

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is that farm families were seen as key actors to be mobilized in national economic development – whereas in failed reforms they have typically been seen as indigents in need of charitable assistance.

### **Land reform, the environment, and the climate crisis**

The benefits of small farm economies extend beyond the economic sphere. Whereas, large industrial-style farms impose a scorched-earth mentality on resource management – no trees, no wildlife, and endless monocultures – small farmers can be very effective stewards of natural resources and the soil. To begin with, small farmers utilize a broad array of resources and have a vested interest in their sustainability. At the same time, their farming systems are diverse, incorporating, and preserving significant functional biodiversity within the farm. By preserving biodiversity, open space and trees, and by reducing land degradation, small farms provide valuable ecosystem services to the larger society.

In the United States, small farmers devote 17 percent of their area to woodlands, compared to only 5 percent on large farms. Small farms maintain nearly twice as much of their land in 'soil improving uses', including cover crops and green manures. In the Third World, peasant farmers show a tremendous ability to prevent and even reverse land degradation, including soil erosion. They can and/or do provide important services to society at-large, including sustainable management of critical watersheds, thus preserving hydrological resources, and the *in situ* conservation, dynamic development and management of the crop, and livestock genetic resources upon which the future food security of humanity depends.

Compared to the ecological wasteland of a modern export plantation, the small-farm landscape contains a myriad of biodiversity. The forested areas from which wild foods, and leaf litter are extracted, the wood lot, the farm itself with intercropping, agroforestry, and large and small livestock, the fish pond, and the backyard garden, all allow for the preservation of hundreds if not

thousands of wild and cultivated species. Simultaneously, the commitment of family members to maintaining soil fertility on the family farm means an active interest in long-term sustainability, not found on large farms owned by absentee investors. If we are truly concerned about rural ecosystems, then the preservation and promotion of small, family farm agriculture is a crucial step we must take.

Furthermore, when agroecology and other forms of sustainable peasant agriculture are practiced on smaller farms, food production becomes more resistant to climate change. These more integrated agroecological farming systems are widely recognized to be more adaptive and resilient to climate change, including droughts, hurricanes, temperature changes, and shifting planting dates (Machín Sosa *et al.*, 2010; Rosset *et al.*, 2011). The higher level of on-farm diversity under agroecology means that if one crop is negatively affected, another one is likely to compensate for it. Mulch and green manures that cover soils protect them from erosion, high temperatures, and conserve moisture. A diversity of varieties make peasant farms more able to adapt to changing conditions than homogenous commercial agriculture (Borron, 2006; Altieri and Koohafkan, 2008; Altieri and Nicholls, 2008; Chappell and LaValle, 2009).

### **Conclusion: Food sovereignty based on agrarian reform and sustainable peasant agriculture**

Only food sovereignty based on genuine agrarian reform, and the defense of land and territory against land grabbing, offers a real alternative to the multiples crises we are facing. Food sovereignty, as I have written elsewhere (Rosset, 2008, 2009a, b) is the only way to effectively protect national food economies from predatory dumping, hoarding, and speculation. Sustainable peasant agriculture as another building block of food sovereignty allows us to survive and even mitigate (La Via Campesina, 2009) the climate crisis. All of these can only be achieved with the kind of paradigm shift that only social movements can bring about.



## Notes

- 1 Sources for much of the information that is not footnoted in the article can be found in Rosset, 2006a.
- 2 [www.viacampesina.org](http://www.viacampesina.org). See also Martínez-Torres and Rosset, 2010.
- 3 La Via Campesina and People's Food Sovereignty Network, 2006.
- 4 This section is based on Rosset, 2006a, all data and cases cited can be found there.

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