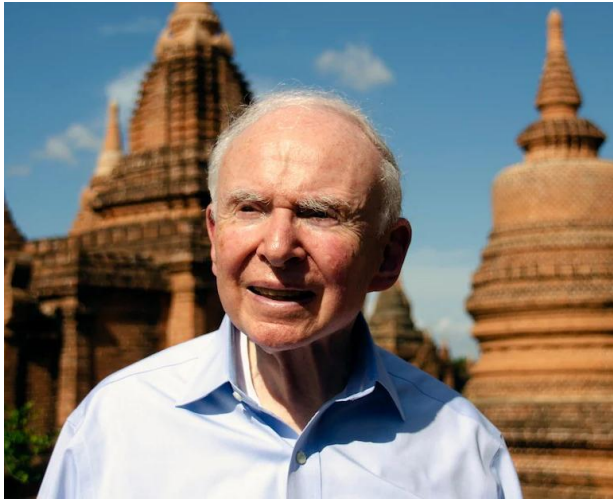


Roy Prosterman, who fought poverty through land rights, dies at 89. By [Emily Langer](#),
The Washington Post, 7 March 2025



After abandoning a career at a white-shoe law firm in the 1960s, he helped lead a movement to secure land rights for impoverished people around the world.

Roy L. Prosterman, a lawyer who abandoned a lucrative corporate practice in the 1960s and dedicated the rest of his life to a campaign against global poverty, founding and leading a nongovernmental organization that helped millions of agricultural workers around the world secure legal rights to the

land they farmed, died Feb. 27 at his home in Seattle. He was 89.

His death [was announced](#) by Landesa, his Seattle-based NGO, formerly known as the Rural Development Institute. He had Parkinson's disease, said Tim Hanstad, his co-founder and a former law student.

Mr. Prosterman embarked on his legal career with a pedigree that would have earned the envy of most any aspiring corporate attorney. He received an undergraduate degree from the University of Chicago at 18, then graduated from Harvard Law School and landed a job at a white-shoe firm in New York City. A prosperous future awaited him.

But as Mr. Prosterman traveled abroad for his work — in particular to Liberia, where his firm was retained to work on a railroad contract — he was deeply affected by the destitution he witnessed.

“It seemed overwhelming, but it seemed that we could not leave things that way,” he told the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* in 2003. “I do believe in the solvability of even very complex problems. That’s also a reason why law was seen as a right sort of discipline for me. It was oriented toward solving problems.”

Mr. Prosterman left his job at the firm in 1965 to become a law professor at the University of Washington in Seattle. A law review article piqued his interest in land reform, a term used in legal and policy parlance to describe the transfer of land rights, often from large, wealthy landowners to poorly paid laborers.

Land reform was at the time a roiling issue in Latin America, where approximately 90 percent of all land belonged to 10 percent of owners, and where Marxist movements called for confiscating land from the rich and redistributing it to the poor.

Mr. Prosterman agreed with many analysts that landlessness was one of the causes at the root of international poverty. But he considered confiscation a “very dumb way” of addressing the problem, one that came with a grave risk of fomenting civil war.

He laid out another approach in an article that appeared in the *Washington Law Review* in 1966 under the title “[Land Reform in Latin America: How to Have a Revolution Without a Revolution.](#)”

“The view that land reform should be carried out with less-than-full compensation of the landlords must be discarded because it will not work, or will not work without an unacceptably high risk of bloody conflict in its implementation,” he wrote.

Instead, he proposed that land reform offer owners “compensation sufficiently full and adequate to disarm the opposition ... of any effective arguments, except perhaps the residual, and politically unappealing, argument that they would lose the brute power represented by the land and the dwellers upon it.”

The article, according to Landesa, attracted the notice of U.S. policymakers focused on the Vietnam War. Mr. Prosterman was hired as a consultant for a study commissioned by the U.S. Agency for International Development on land reform in Vietnam, where he conducted extensive research that included interviewing farmers in rice paddies.

He argued that South Vietnam, which was pitted in the war against communist North Vietnam, was losing the support of its population in large part because of economic insecurity.

Mr. Prosterman played a key role in designing the “land to the tiller” program that was enacted by South Vietnam in 1970 and gave 1 million tenant-farmer households ownership of the land they worked.

He [told the New York Times](#) years later that the effects of the “land to the tiller” program were twofold: rice production increased by 30 percent, and recruitment by pro-communist Vietcong guerrillas fell from a range of 3,500 to 7,000 men per month to 1,000 per month.

South Vietnam ultimately lost the war. But “land to the tiller” — [described](#) by President Richard M. Nixon in 1973 as “one of the most ambitious and far-reaching land distribution programs undertaken by any country in recent times” — helped gather support for land reform efforts elsewhere.

Mr. Prosterman worked out of the University of Washington for years before establishing the Rural Development Institute in 1981. It was renamed Landesa, a portmanteau of “land” and “destiny,” in 2011.

His essential argument was that no country could achieve prosperity or stability without lifting its landless poor out of poverty, and that only through ownership or long-term usage rights to land could agrarian workers have any hope of rising above their station.

Through Landesa, he helped countries establish legal frameworks by which governments could provide small plots of land to people who previously had none. Those frameworks often relied on the legal concept of eminent domain, a process that allows a government to seize private property — with compensation — for a public good.

Mr. Prosterman and Landesa worked in more than 60 countries, including Russia and the surrounding area after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, India, China and nations throughout Latin America, Africa and the Middle East.

In some cases, as in the Soviet Union, redistributed land came from formerly state-owned collective farms. In other places, such as in India, it came either from public property or from private property purchased at a negotiated price. In China, workers are granted long-term usage rather than outright ownership rights.

Daniel Gustafson, who ran the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization’s offices in Kenya and India before becoming deputy director of the entire program, saw Mr. Prosterman’s efforts at work.

The land allotted to agrarian workers may be small, he said in an interview, “but it is a radical improvement for these families,” which “are now on the first rung out of abject poverty.”

Land reform remained a politically divisive issue in regions including Latin America. In 1981, two U.S. agricultural advisers in El Salvador — one of whom had been a law student of Mr. Prosterman’s — were fatally shot while having coffee with the head of the country’s land reform program.

Later that decade, Mr. Prosterman was in the Philippines when he was approached by a coconut plantation owner with a gun strapped to his leg.

He “probably hadn’t taken the trouble to realize we were not for confiscatory land reform and thought, ‘It’s another one of these Marxists,’” Mr. Prosterman told the Seattle Times in 2013. “We left, decided it was not worth the risk.”

The success of land reform has varied by region, [according to](#) an analysis by the Council on Foreign Relations. But advocates argue that in whatever form it comes, a stake in a small piece of land — even a tenth of an acre or less — encourages workers to invest in irrigation systems and other improvements and helps them and their families rise above subsistence.

Jeffrey Riedinger, a former law student of Mr. Prosterman's who sits on the board of Landesa, said in an interview that the organization devotes particular attention to securing land rights for women, who in some countries do not automatically share in property ownership with their husbands. When wives appear jointly with their husbands on land titles, they have greater economic security.

According to Landesa, the organization has strengthened land rights for more than 700 million people internationally.

“If people don't have a stake in the society, if they don't see a future for themselves and their children, they both remain unproductive and they have proclivity to explode,” Mr. Prosterman told the Post-Intelligencer in 1993.

Roy L. Prosterman — the initial L did not stand for anything — was born in Chicago on July 13, 1935. His father, a businessman, was a Jewish immigrant from the Soviet Union, and his mother was American.

Mr. Prosterman, an only child, was academically successful from a young age and received a Ford Foundation scholarship to study at the University of Chicago. He graduated in 1954, when his peers were completing high school, and received his Harvard law degree in 1958.

Mr. Prosterman worked for six years in New York for the law firm of Sullivan & Cromwell before joining the University of Washington, where he taught property, antitrust and international investment law.

In the early years of Landesa, he ran the operation from his home, storing files in his bathtub. As its stature grew, Landesa attracted financial support from organizations including the Gates Foundation. (Landesa's funding today comes from a variety of other institutions.)

The late [Bill Gates Sr.](#), the longtime manager of the Gates Foundation, once told the Seattle Times that “it's an important positive role the development of land rights around the world is going to have, and that's all a function of Roy Prosterman's work.” In the field of land rights, Gates added, “nobody is in second place.”

Mr. Prosterman was never married — he said he was “married” to his work — and had no immediate survivors.

Although he spent decades of his life obtaining land rights for others, he chose never to purchase real estate for himself, in large part because he traveled so frequently. He lived in a rented apartment in Seattle and described himself, kidingly, as a “landless laborer.”