

**HOW BEST TO RESPOND TO THE GREAT CONTEMPT SHOWN BY  
AFRICA'S RULING ELITES TOWARDS THEIR OWN  
SMALL-SCALE FARMERS AND PASTORALISTS?**

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**Keynote address**

'What people most need today is protection from their own elites – both national and local, state and traditional.' Ben White, June 2015 <sup>1</sup>

*1 Introduction*

I don't know the answer to my question, which is why I'm asking it! I hope you will share your thoughts.

Thank you for inviting me here. I've been seriously impressed by the work on the 'global land grab' coming out of the Netherlands in recent years <sup>2</sup> and it's really fantastic to see so many people (over 200) coming to a conference on land.

In mid-1977 I left the University of Zambia, where I had spent 6 highly enjoyable years as a history lecturer and came to the UK, where late in the year James Currey, then with Heinemann Educational Books, published my *Land and Racial Domination in Rhodesia* and the collection on peasant history which I edited with Neil Parsons, *The Roots of Rural Poverty in Central and Southern Africa*.

If someone had told me then that almost 50 years later Africa's ruling political elites would have come to despise their own small-scale farmers and pastoralists and to look kindly on foreign-run large plantations, I'd have cited John McEnroe - you cannot be serious!

Which just goes to show how hard it is to predict accurately about the future. As Ruth Hall has recently written, following a conference on land grabbing in Southeast Asia:

The point is this: if land grabs are proceeding apace across Southeast Asia while faltering in Africa, do their outcomes there give a glimpse of a possible

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<sup>1</sup> Cited in Ruth Hall, 'Land grabbing in Southeast Asia – what can Africa learn?', PLAAS, *Another countryside*, 17 June 2015. <http://www.future-agricultures.org/blog/entry/land-grabbing-in-southeast-asia-what-can-africa-learn>

<sup>2</sup> For example, Sandra J.T.M. Evers, Caroline Seagle and Froukje Krittenburg (Eds), *Africa for Sale? Positioning the State, Land and Society in Foreign Large-Scale Land Acquisitions* (Leiden: Brill, 2013); Mayke Kaag and Annelies Zoomers (Eds), *The Global Land Grab: Beyond the Hype* (London: Zed Books, 2014); An Ansoms and Thea Hilhorst (Eds), *Losing Your Land: Dispossession in the Great Lakes* (Woodbridge: James Currey, 2014); Caroline Archambault and Annelies Zoomers (Eds), *Global Trends in Land Tenure Reform: Gender Impacts* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015). Also the work published in the *Journal of Peasant Studies* by Jun Borras and colleagues.

future were the next phase of land deals to find traction in Africa? What trajectory are we on, and what will it mean for the future of millions of people? At the least, I believe those concerned with land and agricultural commercialisation in Africa should learn some lessons from elsewhere.

Is Africa on the way to deagrarianisation or is there something to be learnt about the modes of organisations and mobilisation in Southeast Asia? So that's a challenge to all of us who work on land rights and rural livelihoods in Africa: to foster these relationships and bridge the divides between activism and research.<sup>3</sup>

I'm an historian by training, so I've always banged on to anyone who would listen about the need for an historical approach to land issues. It has worried me for some time that Africa's ruling elites appear to have completely forgotten much relevant history and seem set on what almost amounts to a return to colonialism path which many of us believe is certain to result in major conflicts in the future. They are certainly further away from their people than they were 50 years ago. I suspect that multi-party systems haven't helped much – elites are tempted to grab what they can while they're still in power.

For the first decade after independence in 1964 the Zambian Government was engaged in a rural development programme. It wasn't great, but it was an attempt to help small-scale farmers, especially those at a distance from the 'line of rail'. But in the mid-1970s, two things happened simultaneously. The price of copper, on which the Zambian economy depended, collapsed and the price of oil, to which landlocked Zambia was highly vulnerable, went through the roof. The economy collapsed. The World Bank came along, saying 'we've got this exciting new programme, ideal for a country like you. It's called structural adjustment. You're not allowed to spend any money on agriculture, but don't worry, the private sector will come in and help your farmers.' The results were catastrophic, as decades of neglect followed. In all the current discussions about the undoubted need for investment in agriculture, the long history of structural adjustment programmes is rarely mentioned.

A good deal of my historical writing was about how much social, political and economic engineering was required to make some white settler farmers relatively 'successful' in a few countries.<sup>4</sup> When some white farmers from Zimbabwe crossed into Mozambique after Fast Track in the early 2000s, they were dismayed to find that they no longer received subsidized power.<sup>5</sup>

Yet Africa's ruling elites now talk glibly about being able to sell or lease large tracts of 'vacant' land to foreigners to create new plantations. Joe Hanlon has pointed out that no new plantations have succeeded in Mozambique since independence in

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<sup>3</sup> Hall, 'Land grabbing in Southeast Asia'.

<sup>4</sup> In addition to the books cited above, see also 'Land Alienation and Agricultural Conflict in Colonial Zambia', in Robert I. Rotberg (Ed), *Imperialism, Colonialism, and Hunger: East and Central Africa* (Lexington: D.C. Heath and Company, 1983), 89-112; 'White Farmers in Malawi: Before and After the Depression', *African Affairs*, **84**, 335, 1985, 211-45.

<sup>5</sup> Amanda Hammar, 'Ambivalent Mobilities: Zimbabwean Commercial Farmers in Mozambique', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, **36**, 2, 2010, 395-416.

1975.<sup>6</sup> Nidhi Tandon told me recently that how Liberia's ruling elite had bought into the plantation models from companies which had been kicked out of some Asian countries for not meeting labour standards and how they made no attempt to implement their legal responsibility to consult with affected communities because of their 'disdain for illiterate peasant communities.' The list is endless. It is also a dominant theme throughout a 2014 book being launched at this conference, *Losing Your Land. Dispossession in the Great Lakes*.<sup>7</sup>

So, as Lenin once and Lionel Cliffe regularly asked, 'what is to be done?' I doubt that reasoned argument will get us anywhere. At the end of the 2011 land grabbing conference in Brighton, Ben White could not find in any of the papers a single case of any large-scale corporate land acquisition which had fulfilled its claimed developmental role of increasing food security, or providing jobs or other benefits for rural people. So, he suggested, the burden of proof was surely now on those who favour corporate land acquisition and corporate industrial farming. A nice idea but.

Similarly, in November 2014 the African Union launched its *Guiding Principles on Large Scale Land Based Investments in Africa*. Joan Kagwanja, Chief of the Land Policy Initiative, said:

This set of principles will equip African countries and enable them to manage land in a transparent and sustainable manner and to negotiate investments with knowledge of resources available on one land as well as the rights attached to it. When the land grabs took place from 2008, African countries were not ready. Land had not been mapped, owners were unidentified and as a consequence, contracts were not negotiated in a way to make investments sustainable and dwellers ended up losing the most.

She believes that African countries are now ready for the challenge of adopting and operationalizing these principles:

We have already launched a series of training to build capacity of leaders, parliamentarians, jurists and other practitioners specializing in land issues. We hope that within the next 3 years at least, we will be able to stop land grabs. And that over the next decade, land management will have seen much needed improvement.

I have enormous respect for Joan, but I just can't see this happening.

What are your thoughts on this?

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<sup>6</sup> *Mozambique 289, News reports & clippings*, 5 June 2015.

<sup>7</sup> The editors note that 'All chapters pay particular attention to the roles of local elites in current land grabs, an element increasingly recognized yet still under-researched in the literature. Interestingly, local elites' strategies to control land are remarkably similar across the four countries [DRC, Uganda, Burundi, Rwanda]. All chapters point to the ability of local elites to instrumentalize the opportunities embedded in the growing commodification of land.' Ansoms and Hilhorst, *Losing your Land*, 8.

## 2) *Appropriate responses?*

There is of course no magic answer, but perhaps the most helpful approach lies in attempting to address power inequalities at local levels in whatever ways are most appropriate in terms of history and culture to make the local political arena a little more equal.

Appropriate responses could lie in a range of activities such as legal education through paralegals, community mapping, strengthening organizations working with women, farmers and agricultural extension and research workers, building linkages between small-scale farmers, processors and traders, the use of radio, videos, posters, songs, drama, cartoons and participatory mapping. It is also important to find what farmers, traders and processors in Africa are already doing and show what is working that can be built on. We need to look more at food and agricultural systems that do and can work, e.g. Marc Wegerif's work on feeding Dar es Salaam.<sup>8</sup>

Practical research is also important, as exemplified by Helen Dancer's recent *Women, Land & Justice in Tanzania*. She writes:

Twenty years have passed since activism on access to justice and legal literacy programmes began in Tanzania... However, reaching women directly through mass media remains a practical challenge in rural areas. Much of the legal literacy education in Arusha has targeted local leaders and officials, who are mostly men, charged with responsibility for implementation of law and procedure under the Land Acts. This reflects a wider picture across Africa.<sup>9</sup>

Research is certainly an interesting but not unproblematic arena. An excellent recent article on Liberia by Kieran Gilroy in *African Affairs* depicts a story of NGO research and advocacy against the company Sime Darby drawn exclusively from evidence of the local elders and based on the notion of a homogeneous community. Yet he talks to young people who tell a very different story. He concludes:

In the absence of academic research that thoroughly interrogates the local realities of contemporary land grabbing, we have been left with narratives that, unchallenged, may issue as sweeping claims of uniform impacts throughout Africa. Communities are far from homogeneous. Land grabbing, in accordance, should not be viewed as producing blanket and unitary outcomes. Underneath broad and simple representations lie many actors and interests.

This article also raises important questions about the relationship between scholarship and international advocacy. NGOs have been granted a privileged position within the discussions of land grabbing, largely as a result of their sheer numbers, prolific publishing, and advantage in access. Scholarship to date has opened itself to the charge of colluding with advocacy through either silence or regurgitation. This is not to say that NGO documentation should be jettisoned completely, or that a strict division should be erected between

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<sup>8</sup> See his paper at the Conference on Land Policy in Africa in November 2014 at <http://www.mdpi.com/2071-1050/6/6/3747>

<sup>9</sup> Helen Dancer, *Women, Land & Justice in Tanzania* (Woodbridge: James Currey, 2015), 154.

activism and academia, but rather to argue for the presence of critique and reflexivity alongside the publication of NGO work.<sup>10</sup>

Related to this, local NGOs who work with INGOs or advocacy groups are very often themselves urban based and have limited experience of the rural contexts in which they conduct 'research'.

Class is also an issue frequently neglected in the literature. There is an excellent article in *ROAPE* by Elisa Greco on Mbarali, Tanzania in which she argues that:

in some localities, there is no such a thing as 'the local people', or 'communities' in the struggle against land grabs, but rather a composite scenario of shifting class alliances.

If it is to make a difference in supporting the existing resistance against dispossession, then engaged scholarship must confront the class dynamics of the countryside, in order to uncover the political potential for more effective organisation and support the progressive elements contained in these shifting, fragile cross-class alliances.

in highly commodified areas rent is a consolidating reality, as large farmers stand alongside increasingly large numbers of absolute landless.<sup>11</sup>

Much food for thought here.

### 3) *Conclusion: Two useful case studies*

I'd like to conclude by briefly citing two initiatives as examples of responding to the need for protection against elites.

i) Chris Tanner and colleagues, Legal Empowerment in Mozambique.

The FAO programme in Mozambique at the Legal and Judicial Training Centre (CFJJ) of the Justice Ministry integrates paralegal training in land, natural resources and environment for NGO staff working at community level, and training for 'frontline' government administrative officers and justice services. This 'twin-track' approach empowers citizens by telling them about their rights, and gives them practical legal support. It also empowers local government officers by explaining the legal framework and how to use it in practice to respond to local needs; and it can also circumvent institutional and political pressures which favour 'fast tracking' investment over participatory and equitable development. The result is greater local *social accountability* - citizens 'extracting' a better, rights-aware response from local public services and investors alike. Underlying causes of land conflict and injustice are replaced with new ideas and community-investor partnerships. The good governance of land and natural resources by district administrators and other local

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<sup>10</sup> Kieran Gilroy, 'Land Grabbing and NGO Advocacy in Liberia: A Deconstruction of the "Homogeneous Community"', *African Affairs*, **114**, 455, 2015, 204-5.

<sup>11</sup> Elisa Greco, 'Landlords in the making: class dynamics of the land grab in Mbarali, Tanzania', *Review of African Political Economy*, **42**, 144, 2015, 237, 239, 236.

officials feeds into changing attitudes and policy orthodoxies higher up. On the community side, the CFJJ-FAO programme has educated local people and their leaders about their individual and collective rights over land and natural resources, and given them the tools they needed to defend them when necessary. It has reached right down to village level, across the country.<sup>12</sup>

## ii) *NAMATI's Community Land Protection Programme*

Namati is building a global movement of grassroots legal advocates who work with communities to advance justice to ensure that people can protect their land, access essential services, and take part in the decisions that govern their lives. They are trained in basic law and in skills like mediation, organizing, education, and advocacy. They form a dynamic, creative frontline that can engage formal and traditional institutions alike. The Programme works proactively to strengthen communities' ability to protect, document and defend their customary and indigenous land rights in an equitable and gender-sensitive manner.

Namati has designed a powerful 4-step process for protecting community lands and natural resources. Its approach combines the legal and technical work of mapping and documentation with land conflict resolution and community-wide agreement on local rules for land and natural resource management. Namati encourages land rights advocates to adapt the approach as necessary to their local context and culture. The 4 steps are:

- a) *Laying the groundwork* (visioning, valuation, legal literacy, coordinating committee, community land mobilizers)
- b) *Documenting community lands* (participatory mapping, boundary harmonization and land conflict resolution, documenting boundaries, technical geo-referencing, government registration and titling)
- c) *Strengthening community governance* (creation of community by-laws, creation of a local land governance body, long-term good governance)
- d) *Preparing communities to prosper* (livelihood diversification, land use planning / zoning, ecosystem regeneration, participation for potential investor requests, financial management)

Namati's publications include short animated videos, simple concrete guides, practical briefs, findings of work in Liberia, Uganda and Mozambique. The practical briefs are written by grassroots legal advocates detailing challenges faced and successful strategies developed during community land protection efforts.<sup>13</sup>

I'd like to hear from you about examples of positive responses to my question.

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<sup>12</sup> Christopher Tanner, Marianna Bicchieri & Margret Vidar, *Legal Empowerment and Access to Justice as Instruments for Good Land Governance*, World Bank Conference on Land and Poverty, 23-27 March 2015 [http://www.mokoro.co.uk/files/13/file/Iria/Tanner\\_paper\\_WB.pdf](http://www.mokoro.co.uk/files/13/file/Iria/Tanner_paper_WB.pdf)

<sup>13</sup> Namati, *Community Land Protection Program*, forthcoming at <http://namati.org/>