



The work and legacy of Robin Palmer in the land rights sector: How can we build on this today?

By Sarah Candy

Following the passing of Robin Palmer in February 2023, Mokoro organised a seminar that paid tribute to Robin's pioneering work within the land rights sector. On the 3rd of July 2023, 40 people gathered at the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford and 20 online to join this tribute to Robin, to look back at how the land rights sector has changed over the time span of his career and discuss the impact that his work made. Elizabeth Daley chaired the hybrid seminar that featured colleagues and friends of Robin.

Summative reflections on the speaking contributions

Camilla Toulmin met Robin in the mid-1990s when an awareness was growing that land rights had been largely neglected. Robin was instrumental in highlighting the gap between what the law says and the reality on the ground. A dichotomy that was exacerbated by the increased pressure that already weak land rights structures were coming under from rising demographics and growing cities. We can see that there is still a long way to go as countries are passing progressive legislation, but there is very little practical change to accompany the legal reform. Pressure on land has tightened further with contemporary forms of land grabbing: lithium mining, special economic zones, carbon offsetting. Limited effort has been made to increase awareness of new laws, and pastoral land rights are particularly weak. We need to go back Robin's wisdom: law will stay on paper until we find ways for practical action.

Sibongile Ndashe joined online to speak about the mentorship of Robin when she was a lawyer working for a feminist organisation in 2003. Robin took every opportunity to learn, to listen and was fascinated with how to translate laws into tangible change. He had a special skill of creating spaces for people to convene and discuss and as such, was instrumental in creating a women's land rights community that thrived. Robin created a space for women's land rights advocates to engage with academics and ensured that everyone's engagement was important so that they continued to contribute. Robin's legacy is about intentionally creating the spaces for young people to be inspired to drive change.

Max Lawson first worked with Robin at Oxfam when the team were working on food security projects in Malawi. There was a realisation that farming techniques alone would not help when people were trying to survive on very small portions of land. Robin's visit changed Max's life in some ways, helping to situate the work in colonial history and Max fell in love with the history of frontline states and anti-Apartheid struggles. Robin helped to keep Oxfam as radical as possible, and his determination to change the world created an environment for others to do so too.

Three videos were shared from **Esther Obaikol, Prosper Matondi and Birgit Englert**. All three spoke affectionately and admirably about how their work has been shaped by the writings and mentorship of Robin. Robin has given many others the information to withstand the pressure from large scale land acquisitions which contrasts with his humility for someone who was such a powerful force to be reckoned with.

Finally, **Ian Scoones** spoke of Robin the scholar-activist: linking research and scholarship with policy in action. He taught others to do the same. Robin's books that are so influential for land rights actors are detailed and analytical, but they are also passionate and political, just like Robin himself. They are written from his lived experience. They help others to understand the deep brutality of colonial rule and the power struggle over land. Robin was one of the rare people to connect academia and development activists. Ian summarised the view of all the speakers as he spoke



The seminar had speakers, and attendees, joining virtually from different continents.
(Photo by Celine Corneanu)

of Robin as a mentor, as someone who created spaces to convene and discuss, Robin's insistence that research is innately always political. He had a skill for connecting historical scholarship with contemporary debate, and one of Robin's greatest legacies was his labour of love, the hugely valuable resource, the [Lands Rights in Africa website](#).


The discussion concluded with exploring what areas within the land rights sector remain to be addressed, and that there is clearly work to be done to move land debate from its current state of marginalisation, into the mainstream political and policy sphere. But Robin's work, the legacy of his writings, and multiple generations of land activists that he mentored has laid a strong foundation for further change.

Quotes from the seminar

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HOW CAN WE BUILD ON THIS TODAY?

*A Mokoro seminar
Ashmolean Museum, Oxford*




"Robin had this way of holding space [for others] within this thriving community of land rights actors. I no longer saw myself as exclusively a 'part' of this community. Robin had inspired me to delve deeper, and contribute in a way that furthered my understanding of women's land rights."

*Sibongile Ndashe,
Director, ISLA.*

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"Robin was always on the side of the oppressed - if you want to make some significant changes to land, you're going to be taking on some powerful people, and their vested interests"

"It is about understanding all these complexities, all these structures and barriers to change, but still getting up every morning passionate about what you want to do. That was Robin, he really wanted to change the world"

Max Lawson, Oxfam.

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"[In his doctoral thesis] Using a forensic, document-based approach that combined narrative and analysis, Robin dismantled three of the main cherished myths underpinning the legal, administrative and economic institutions of white colonial supremacy."

*Shimwaayi Muntamba
Senior Consultant*

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"We need to go back to Robin's sound wisdom and recognise that law will only stay on paper until we find ways to exercise those rights in practice. While the formal frameworks matter, there is no substitute for grounded actions to test out the provisions. There is very much a continuing job to be done and I join all of you in wishing Robin was still here to help us think through and inspire the next generation to get stuck in"

*Camilla Toulmin,
IIED Associate.*

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"Robin is still very much part of what I do when it comes to shifting the needle around land governance in Africa."


"Robin had such a huge influence around the world with his work. You could not think he was that humble, and yet such a powerful force to reckon with."

*Esther Obaikol,
Land Governance Expert,
IGAD.*

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"There was something extraordinary about him - the power that was behind his words."

*Prosper Matondi,
Founder of Ruzivo Trust*

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"[Robin's] work over many years was so important in connecting many people in the development space with thinking about history and learning about history for today's challenges. It's so important because many projects just have no sense of depth and time."

*Ian Scoones, Institute of
Development Studies.*

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"His generosity in sharing knowledge have shaped more than just one generation of people working on land rights issues. In so many regards, he led the way. Thank you, Robin. We'll carry on."

*Birgit Englert,
Professor in African Studies.*