

**This is the 1,000<sup>th</sup> entry on this site!**

**Some thoughts on the *Land Rights in Africa* website, 2000-2017**

<http://www.mokoro.co.uk/other-resources/land-rights-in-africa>

Robin Palmer  
Land Rights Adviser, Mokoro

#### *Origins of the site*

I set up this website in January 2000 and have run it ever since. It's a one-man dictatorship!

Back then I was Oxfam's Land Policy Adviser for Africa. My intention was to make use of the exciting new technology to provide space for the views of some of the civil society organizations and researchers Oxfam was trying to support in a context in which donors, particularly the World Bank, were pushing hard for new land laws and policies in Africa in a spirit of post - Cold War triumphalism.

Though in Oxfam space, it was never an 'official' Oxfam site. It remained in Oxfam space after I retired from Oxfam in February 2007 when Oxfam said it was happy to allow me to continue to run it.

Then in May 2012 it moved from Oxfam to Mokoro, an Oxford-based international consultancy group where a number of us, including myself, work on land rights. We hold regular seminars, most recently on [\*Land Rights in Africa, Past, Present and Future\*](#).

This move was made at the request of Oxfam, and Mokoro was happy to host and manage the site. I am deeply grateful to Mokoro for this.

On the front 'page' of the website there is the standard cautionary note saying: 'Mokoro are happy to host Land Rights in Africa here on our website. The views expressed here are those of the authors and do not represent those of Mokoro.'

#### *Purpose of the site*

Just before this change in 2012 I was asked these 3 questions by Oxfam:

***Who is the target audience for the land rights pages?***

Land rights activists in Africa, researchers, academics, NGOs, donors, land administrators, journalists.

***What are the objectives of the pages? What do you want them to achieve?***

Awareness raising and sharing lessons and experience. The site was originally designed to give a voice to the Uganda Land Alliance and others with whom Oxfam was working in a context of strong drives towards

privatisation and new land laws and policies being introduced all over Africa. Later there was a thrust of sharing some very good lessons and practice from Mozambique. Later (and still) there has been a very strong focus on women's land rights, inspired in good measure by the late Kaori Izumi, and in recent years on global land grabbing and its huge impact on Africa.

***Do you know of any similar sites on land rights? What makes the Oxfam GB land rights pages different to other sites?***

In one sense they were developed as an alternatives to the dominant World Bank orthodoxy. The World Bank was, and remains, a key player on land issues, and the Oxfam site allowed – and still allows - poor people's and civil society perspectives to be heard. Over the years a wide variety of people have commented that it provides something special that other sites don't. It does seem to be widely admired by practitioners.

*Sources*

This short piece is the 1,000<sup>th</sup> document to be posted on the land rights site, a figure I find truly amazing. Apart from the 'Africa general' section, the bulk of these documents cover Southern and Eastern Africa, which reflects my own academic and NGO experiences (I kicked off with a PhD on the politics of land in Rhodesia – colonial Zimbabwe). I have always tried to engage with both the academic and the NGO worlds and, more importantly, to encourage each to engage with the other.

**In the overwhelming majority of cases, I have used the citations of the organizations producing the report, research, briefing etc.** Before a fairly recent technological change, the site had made this clear as it had indicated to a potential reader *Download* from IIED etc, whereas now it just says *Download*.

As a precaution, the front 'page' carries this note: 'Wherever possible, we link to the source website of publications. However, we kindly request that readers notify Mokoro if the URLs to publications change or are removed. Please send amendments to [mokoro@mokoro.co.uk](mailto:mokoro@mokoro.co.uk).'

So *Land Rights in Africa* is overwhelmingly a site which directs the reader to the original sources, such as IIED, PLAAS, Land Matrix, LANDac, IISD, FAO etc.

*Problems encountered*

Here I am responding to what the Oxford academic Jason Mosley called 'wrestling with practical issues around hosting content that might be copyrighted elsewhere'.

My experience has been that people generally have been very happy to have had their work posted on *Land Rights in Africa*. I consciously seek out people whose work I respect and often people approach me asking if I can post their work. (Sometimes I decline!). **In essence this is a pro-poor land reform site.**

In the early years of the site (c.2000-2008), I managed to post a few journal articles from e.g. *Review of African Political Economy* and *Third World Quarterly* with the willing consent of the publishers.

In more recent years, however, as access to journals has generally become more 'privatised' (and I even have to rely on academic friends to send me articles for my personal reading), this became increasingly difficult and so I've stopped trying. Sometimes new articles may be available on public access, but only for a limited period, which of course is no use for a website which is now seventeen and a half years old!

Two years ago I tried to post an article on land advocacy in Africa in a book on advocacy in conflict. Both the author and the book's editor were happy to allow this, but the book's publisher said no.

I have managed to post the odd PhD. This of course requires the permission of both the writer and the relevant university.

In the world of consultancy I have obviously tended to tread cautiously, based on some managerial experiences within Mokoro. For example, last year I was asked to post a report by a Mokoro colleague, which had been commissioned by DFID. After searching around I declined to do so on the grounds of potential sensitivity / confidentiality as it had had yet to appear on any DFID (or other) website. The author understood and respected my decision.

#### *Some sort of conclusion*

Not surprisingly I believe that the Land Rights site was a good idea back in 2000 and that it continues to be a good idea! One of the key challenges now, as it was back then, is getting hold of reliable information. In the current context of global land grabbing, now involving palm oil, this is even more critical, as there are many powerful people (especially local and national elites and foreign investors) who have very strong vested interests in not making critical information available to communities likely to be affected. A number of researchers I've met recently have told me how they have faced serious challenges in understanding which version of events they have been presented with to believe. Researchers need to spend time, a commodity not always available, and they also need, argues this ex-historian, to know something of the history of the place they are studying.

Some of the most interesting work captured on this website comprises attempting to address power inequalities at local levels through legal education with paralegals and community mapping; to strengthen organizations working with women, with farmers and agricultural extension and research workers; and to build linkages between small-scale farmers, processors and traders along value chains.

But, of course, it cannot capture the really important role in Africa of the use of radio, of mobile phones, [posters](#), songs, cartoons (as famously in the [Mozambique Land Campaign, 1997-99](#)) and drama. I remember how, at the opening of the Copperbelt Land Rights Centre in Zambia in 2004, a number of us, myself included, made the usual speeches which met with polite, but restrained, applause. We were followed by a drama group which depicted struggles over land based on class, gender and age which were listened to, even by the men in suits, with rapt attention, followed by unrestrained applause. I have never forgotten that.