**THE LAND RIGHTS IN AFRICA WEBSITE IS NOW 20 YEARS OLD!**

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[This website](http://mokoro.co.uk/resource/land-rights-in-africa/) is now 20 years old! It started in Oxfam space on 6 January 2000 and moved to Mokoro space in March 2012. I have been fortunate because I have run the website as an absolute dictator for all that time – I have never been constrained by any editorial board; I’ve been trusted to get on with it. I totally respect and have thoroughly appreciated that freedom.

In my archives I recently found this endorsement from Rachael Knight in 2013. ‘This is the BEST source of writing on land rights in Africa on the entire internet. I am not kidding’ she told her colleagues at Namati.

*Being an academic*

I spent the first half of my working life as an academic, teaching History at the Universities of Malawi and Zambia. It was a truly wonderful experience – small classes, no smart phones, and a widely shared belief in the importance of both researching and writing up African History (colonialists denied that Africans had any history!), and on land in particular – I wrote a PhD and later a book on the politics of land in Rhodesia. I recognized that anyone working on land rights in Africa needed both passion and a sense of injustice about the way things are and a strong desire to want to change them. My academic career terminated but in 1987 I landed a job with Oxfam and stayed there for 20 years!

*Moving to Oxfam*

During my first 8 years I was attached to Oxfam’s Southern Africa Desk in Oxford, initially as a Desk Officer (essentially a communications job), and then as a Regional Manager. Those jobs involved travelling a good deal in Zimbabwe, Zambia, Malawi, Angola and Mozambique, often quite ‘deep in the bush’, meeting people in both civil society and government. Many fascinating experiences.

*Land Rights Adviser, Africa*

My time on the Southern Africa Desk came to an end in 1995 and I was then employed, presumably on the strength of my academic career, as a Land Rights Adviser for Africa. This involved more travelling, especially in Southern and Eastern Africa, making use of the contacts I had by now established in both the academic and the NGO worlds. A key person was Ian Leggett, who had been Desk Officer and Regional Manager for East Africa. He had lived in Tanzania and was extremely conscious of the significance of land issues there and throughout East Africa. He was strongly supportive of my new role. He initiated a piece of research on

[villagization in Ethiopia, Mozambique and Tanzania](http://mokoro.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/villagisation_experiences_eth_moz_tanz.pdf) in order to caution Rwanda’s Minister of Lands, who he had known when they both lived in Tanzania, as she was about to follow that same path. My new job was essentially a networking and communications role. The context was one of increasing pressures on land, of new land laws and policies being drafted, and national NGO land coalitions and alliances being established. It was also of course a context of post-Cold War triumphalism. The donor (especially World Bank) answer on land was a simple one – privatisation. This posed a new and very serious threat to many. In this context, it was important to argue and demonstrate in those Reagan/Thatcher times that there were indeed alternatives.

The job focused very much on research, information gathering and dissemination, awareness raising, building trust and advocacy in a wide variety of ways including TV and radio interviews, briefing of journalists, and much public speaking, where my 10 years as a lecturer came in handy. It involved a good deal of engagement with civil society, governments and donors (in particular DFID and the World Bank), trying to get them to enter into constructive dialogues with each other and – virtually impossible this – to adopt long-term horizons. It also meant trying to reach a broad spectrum of potential key actors. Academics who were deeply concerned about land rights could clearly potentially play a hugely helpful and constructive role. Many did just that, notably [H.W.O. Okoth-Ogendo](http://www.ielrc.org/content/b1702.pdf) and [Patrick McAuslan](http://mokoro.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/PMcAusalanjan2014.pdf).

*Changing technology and the origins of the Land Rights website*

Another context in the 1990s was of course rapidly changing technology – the coming of mobile phones (which I first came across in South Africa), emails and the internet. This was self-evidently, even to a non-techhie like myself, of enormous potential benefit for a land rights adviser. I was able, for example, to download African newspapers, look for articles of land and circulate them to both Oxfam staff and civil society organizations, including newly formed land alliances. With their encouragement I duly compiled a 306-page literature survey called [Contested Lands in Southern and Eastern Africa,](https://www.developmentbookshelf.com/doi/book/10.3362/9780855986834) which was published as an Oxfam Working Paper in October 1997. In a review in *Africa*, Deborah Potts of SOAS concluded: ‘Finally, for anyone starting work on land in Africa, read Palmer’s introduction. It’s worth a month in the library.’

Such was the context in which the *Land Rights in Africa* website was launched on 6 January 2000. If someone had told me then that it would still be going strong in 20 years’ time, I would have cited John McEnroe – ‘you cannot be serious!’.

In an introduction written in December 1999 just before the launch of the site I wrote:

In recent years Oxfam GB and many of its partners in Africa have become increasingly involved in the issue of land rights.

This is because access to land, which remains for many people in Africa the ultimate form of social security, is being severely threatened. The threat comes from a combination of local and international factors, which include excessive liberalisation, the search for foreign investment, and an often-blind faith in market solutions. It particularly affects land held by groups of people under some form of customary tenure, in which access is dependent on acknowledged membership of a group. This remains important throughout the continent, despite various attempts to extinguish it.

So, in many places a land grab reminiscent of the original Scramble for Africa is currently underway, involving mining investors, tourist speculators, ruling elites and corrupt chiefs.

There has also been a rash of new land legislation and policies, especially in East and Southern Africa, which potentially threatens the interests of the poor. New land laws were passed in 1998/9 in Uganda, Tanzania, Mozambique and South Africa, and more will follow – but they are proving very difficult to implement because of resource and capacity constraints, or, in the case of South Africa, lack of political will.

In response, local NGOs have endeavoured to help communities become more aware of their rights – and determine how best to demand and defend them. They have also vigorously lobbied their governments as well as key donors such as the World Bank and DFID. In a number of countries they have come together to form national alliances, most recently in Kenya, where in November 1999 the government announced the formation of a Presidential Land Commission. Its counterpart in Malawi finally published its report in the same month.

Oxfam GB has become involved in many of these struggles and debates, either directly or in support of its partners. It has consistently pushed for the need for openness and for genuine public consultation and discussion before new laws are passed which might affect people’s livelihoods for many years to come.

The documents gathered together on this website illustrate some of these struggles, which will certainly continue and remain highly significant for many years to come, as people continue to strive for sustainable livelihoods in what, all too frequently, has become very inhospitable terrain.

Among the key principles listed in January 2001 were women’s land rights and working with pastoralists.

I initially saw the website as a place where, in a context in which the rich and powerful tend to control both power and information, I could disseminate arguments in favour of pro-poor land reform and where I could publicise the work of e.g. the land alliances in South Africa, Uganda, Tanzania and Kenya. In the face of some very positive initial responses, the site started to grow. In the early months of 2000, I was receiving comments such as:

Brilliant! Great work – keep it up! Have already alerted my students to the site. (David Simon).

I’ve got it! It looks great. It is great. (Martin Adams).

Thank you most sincerely for the wonderful collection you have just sent us. This will prove very valuable to our own institution (ZERO) as well as our partners in the region. (Felix Mustapha).

The site clearly is very popular. And it looks extremely useful – I’ve already downloaded a number of articles from it. (Donna Hornby).

Very impressive and a wonderful resource. (Stephen Allen).

Congratulations on a great site and idea and then of course thank you for it. You have saved me hours of plodding through a number of articles on the web. (Gwendolyn Wellman).

The land stuff is really good. Great that more people across the globe will be able to access the site. (Nicola Sutherland).

By the way, the landrights website is excellent – I make much use of it in my teaching. (JoAnn McGregor).

With that kind of endorsement, it was clear that the website was rather a good idea!

In December 2004 I wrote:

There have been overwhelmingly positive responses to this website as it has grown over the past 5 years. It seems that a wide range of people, including many for whom it was not primarily intended, such as law professors, have found it both informative and helpful. So it has not proved difficult to solicit contributions on topics such as women’s land rights, or on countries with interesting experiences to offer, such as Mozambique and South Africa. Journals have also often been generous in allowing reproduction of articles on this site. Significantly, NGO land alliances and coalitions have welcomed the ‘oxygen of publicity’ it has afforded. A serious attempt has been made to present materials which are brief, topical and written in accessible language.

With greater competition for land resources, increased mobility and specialisation, and the incorporation of rural areas into market economies, the importance of secure land rights increases for the poor as well as for the privileged. Recent global developments have left many poor people more vulnerable and more dependent on access to land as a critical asset than ever before, while that very access is increasingly under threat in a globalising world.

Looking back, I think that in the early stages I saw it as very much an Oxfam site, supporting the work that Oxfam programmes and allies and I were all trying to achieve – finding voices for pro-poor land reform. Later I widened the scope and moved towards a broader range of entries comparable to those which appeared in my 1997 literature survey.

From time to time people in Oxfam House asked ‘why not make the site international in scope?’, to which my response was ‘I know African countries well enough to assess the value of the articles I read, but I could not say the same of other parts of the world.’

In February 2007 Oxfam retired me – after 20 years. It wasn’t a decision I agreed with at the time, but on mature reflection I think it was the right one!

Shortly after that came the global financial crisis which, among other things, sparked off an intensified global land grab as grain prices escalated, some grain exporting countries banned exports, many dry countries sought greener pastures elsewhere, and there was huge speculation about biofuels. This was a development which, as Oxfam's Global Land Adviser (my final job title!), I had totally failed to predict!

I now had both the time and the strong inclination to start trying to find out more about what was going on. I went to a meeting of researchers and NGO and CSO folk in Southern Africa in early 2008 and asked the audience of about 50 ‘has anyone here heard of biofuels?’ – and no-one had. This persuaded me that I might usefully spend time compiling bibliographies to help create greater awareness of the global land grab and its possible future implications for Africa.

So I did this, posting the first select bibliographies of reports and of press cuttings in August 2009, noting that ‘this is part of ongoing research and will be updated and hopefully annotated at a later stage’. It was indeed, about every 3 months, until an almost final effort, dated 31 July 2013. This contained (1) [reports](http://mokoro.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/landgrab_select_bibliography_1_reports_july_2013.pdf), (2) [books, journal articles and TV, video and radio clips](http://mokoro.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/landgrab_select_bibliography_2_books_journal_articles_tv_video_radio_clips_july_2013.pdf), and (3) [press cuttings](http://mokoro.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/landgrab_select_bibilography_3_press_cuttings_july_2013.pdf). The total amounted to 248 pages! They were naturally posted on the *Land Rights in Africa* website. I prefaced the bibliographies with this comment:

I have been compiling select bibliographies on *Biofuels, Land Rights in Africa and Global Land Grabbing* for the past 5 years. My prime motive was to attempt to arouse awareness of what I regard as a very dangerous phenomenon with likely extremely serious long-term consequences for small-scale farmers across Africa. I’m delighted to note that awareness has certainly been raised – in the media, in research institutes and pressure groups, in international NGOs and, increasingly, among academics. We are now seeing some serious books being published on both land grabbing and biofuels. With new material appearing at such a rapid rate, my fears of a dangerous conspiracy of silence have long abated.

In September 2017 I did an absolutely final 78-page [select bibliography of reports and press cuttings on land rights in Africa and global land grabbing August 2013 – August 2017](http://mokoro.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/landgrab_select_bibliog_August_2013_to_August_2017.pdf).

*The move to Mokoro*

Oxfam clearly appreciated my work sufficiently to allow me to keep on running the Land Rights site after it retired me in 2007. By then I was seeing it much more as a site in Oxfam space rather than an Oxfam site and I was obviously no longer engaged in direct Oxfam advocacy. This situation continued until March 2012 when Oxfam decided that it now had doubts about retaining the site. This came rather out of the blue. I immediately contacted my friends in Mokoro, an Oxford-based consultancy group I had been introduced to years earlier by Martin Adams. I approached both the ‘land group’ of consultants (Martin Adams, Liz Daley, Chris Tanner and Stephen Turner) and some of the office folk, notably Stephen Lister, and they instantly agreed that Mokoro would be more than happy to take over the running of the site. It took a while for this vast archive – it now contains over 1,200 items – to be transferred into Mokoro space, where it now happily sits – <http://mokoro.co.uk/resource/land-rights-in-africa/>

I cannot begin to thank Mokoro for agreeing to this, especially Stephen Lister, and not least Fran Girling (who introduced me to links!), Zoe Driscoll and Zoe Millington, who have actually managed the site over the past almost 8 years. And a belated thanks to Martin Brodetsky (the official historian of Oxford United!) who managed it during my Oxfam years.

Just before this change to Mokoro in 2012 I was asked these 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 who Oxfam was working with 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, and in recent years on global land grabbing and its 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 alternative 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.

**How do you currently promote the pages?**

In a variety of ways. Mostly by talking about it when I’m in the public domain, e.g. in 2010 I spoke to: FAO, CAFOD, ODI, Farm Africa, Chatham House, University of the Western Cape, the Southern Africa Confederation of Agricultural Unions, a London workshop on land grabbing in Oromia, Ethiopia, the ASAUK biennial conference in Oxford, a conference on agrarian development in Africa in Harare, a book launch in Harare.

**Do you have any ideas for the future of the pages?**

New themes have emerged at different times and the pages have sought to reflect that. This will doubtless continue, but I don’t anticipate that land grabbing will disappear any time soon or that issues around women’s land rights will go away. The feedback I receive regularly is that people continue to find them useful.

*Contents*

In January 2020 there are just over 1,200 documents posted on the Land Rights site. The most popular are: Africa General (345), South Africa (89), Kenya (78), Uganda (76), Zimbabwe (69) and Mozambique (62). The bulk of them cover Southern and Eastern Africa, which reflects my own academic and NGO experiences. The oldest in Africa General is Martin Adams’ October 1995 ODI paper, [*Land Reform: New Seeds or Old Ground?*](http://mokoro.co.uk/land-rights-article/land-reform-new-seeds-or-old-ground/)

I’ve recently been told that in the last 4 years (1 December 2015 – 30 November 2019), there have been 19,136 views of the Land Rights in Africa website. This apparently equates to an average of 399 page views per month and 92 page views per week.

My experience has been that people generally have been very happy to have had their work posted on *Land Rights in Africa*. I have consciously sought out people whose work I respected and frequently people have approached me asking if I could post their work.

I have always tried to engage with both the academic and the NGO worlds and, most importantly, to encourage each to engage with the other.

There are many publications by the likes of IIED, Transparency International, DIIS and PLAAS.

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’, this became increasingly difficult. Sometimes now articles may be open on public access, but only for a limited period, which of course is no use for a website which is 20 years old!

I have managed to post the odd PhD, including 3 on Zimbabwe! This of course requires the permission of both the writer and the relevant university.

Occasionally I have managed to post whole books, which is great!

There are also a few films and videos, including [a collection of 9 from the October 2019 Pan-African Indigenous Gathering](https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLUtvIa4Yp5ylGC9uitxH6pRu5PqS8bnju).

There have been regular postings of new land laws and policies and critical analyses of these.

I’m generally not a great fan of blogs and am very grateful that I’ve never been compelled to write them regularly. But I have made an exception for Ian Scoones’ remarkable long-term research on [Zimbabwe](https://zimbabweland.wordpress.com/) and have also included one of [my rare ventures in this field](https://africanarguments.org/2011/01/20/land-grabbing-in-africa-ii/).

In recent years, the weekly update from GRAIN’s [farmlandgrab.org](https://farmlandgrab.org), which tracks the global land grab and people's resistance to it, I have found extremely useful – though often very depressing. I have posted many of its entries on the Land Rights site.

*Some sort of conclusion*

Not surprisingly I believed that the Land Rights site was a good idea back in 2000 and that it continues to be a good idea 20 years later!

One of the key challenges now, as it was back then, is trying to get 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 by land grabbing.

A number of researchers I’ve met recently, including Kristina Lanz, have said 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 a great deal about the history of the place they are studying.

The website contains, I believe, an extraordinarily diverse range of subjects and authors. Some of the most interesting work covers attempts to address power inequalities at local levels through legal education with paralegals and community mapping (see the work of Rachael Knight and Lorenzo Cotula); to strengthen organizations working with women (following the example of the late Kaori Izumi); on the impact of HIV and AIDS (again Kaori Izumi); with farmers and agricultural extension and research workers; and to build linkages between small-scale farmers, processors and traders along value chains. An entry from May 2019 is called [*How satellites can locate potential land grabs in Africa*](https://www.arcgis.com/apps/Cascade/index.html?appid=5f39e46767754625854b32005651ca17)!

But, of course, it cannot capture the critically important role in Africa of the use of radio, of mobile phones, of posters, songs, and cartoons (as famously in the [Mozambique Land Campaign, 1997-9](http://mokoro.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/mozambique_land_campaign_1977_9.pdf)), of poetry (one of the first students I taught was the remarkable [Jack Mapanje), and of drama](http://www.critical-stages.org/15/malawi-theatre-history-theatre-for-development/). I remember how, at the opening of the Copperbelt Land Rights Centre in Zambia in 2004, a number of us 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.

I suppose that right from my early days as a history student I have always collected things, created libraries, compiled bibliographies, stuck things up in the loft etc. I’m still doing it! The Land Rights site obviously fits into this rather sad pattern.

Reaching this 20th anniversary has made me to ask myself this blindingly obvious question – in the context of pro-poor land reform, are things any better now than they were back in 2000? I rather fear the answer!

Later this year, inshallah, I shall reach 4 score years, which raises the obvious question, what next for the website?

Whatever, [A luta continua!](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iA2Uc5uwj7U)

