

*Democracy, Land and Liberation in Africa Today:  
Bridging Past and Present Scholarship.  
A colloquium in honour of Lionel Cliffe*

Cape Town, 20– 21 October 2014

**WORKING ON LAND - HISTORY, RIGHTS AND GRABBING -  
IN THE ACADEMIC, NGO AND CONSULTANCY WORLDS, 1964-2014**

by

**ROBIN PALMER**

**Mokoro Ltd**

<b>1. INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>2. THE ACADEMIC WORLD, 1960-84</b>	<b>3</b>
<i>a. Universities in Southern Africa</i>	<b>3</b>
<i>b. My Academic Writing</i>	<b>6</b>
<b>3. THE NGO WORLD, 1987-2007</b>	<b>8</b>
<i>a. Oxfam's Southern Africa Desk</i>	<b>8</b>
<i>b. Land Rights</i>	<b>11</b>
<i>i. Introduction</i>	<b>11</b>
<i>ii. Women's Land Rights</i>	<b>14</b>
<i>iii. Working with Zimbabwean Researchers for             Oxfam International, 2003-9</i>	<b>19</b>
<i>iv. Land and Property Rights in post-tsunami Aceh</i>	<b>22</b>
<i>v. Conclusion</i>	<b>26</b>
<b>4. THE CONSULTANCY WORLD</b>	<b>27</b>
<i>a. Introduction</i>	<b>27</b>
<i>b. Zimbabwe 1999</i>	<b>28</b>
<i>c. South Africa 2000 – DLA</i>	<b>29</b>
<i>d. South Africa 2001 – the LRC</i>	<b>30</b>
<b>5. AN ACADEMIC AGAIN IN RETIREMENT?, 2007-</b>	<b>31</b>
<b>6. CONCLUSION</b>	<b>35</b>

## 1. INTRODUCTION

‘Does anyone remember the Tanganyika Groundnut Scheme?’  
Lionel Cliffe, during a discussion on contemporary land grabbing  
at the ASUK conference, Oxford, September 2010

In reflecting on Lionel Cliffe and his career both as an academic and an activist, one curious thought came to me – that we had both spent time in the academic, consultancy and NGO worlds. For Lionel the latter involved working for Oxfam for 4 years as a conscientious objector to national service in the late 1950s. He was apparently an Information and Research Assistant! My stint with Oxfam lasted 20 years, but my academic career was far shorter than Lionel’s. In this paper I will try to reflect on how the 3 key strands in my working life were linked.

Like most of us at this colloquium, I suspect, I have many fond memories of Lionel. We were neighbours on the campus of the University of Zambia in the 1970s; we comprised the British addition to a South African team assessing the impact of the South African land reform programme in 2000; we were at many conferences together; and he was a very willing participant in a group I organised to present papers on land at the African Studies Association of the UK conference in Oxford in 2010, where his paper was entitled ‘Historical Reflections on Land Reform in former Settler Colonies: Kenya, Zimbabwe and South Africa in Comparative Perspective’. He was, of course, both a prolific scholar and a committed activist.

He was also pretty good at telling jokes. He once asked: ‘I’m flying into Harare over the commercial farming area. But not much is going on. A lot of the land seems to have been abandoned. What year was that?’. The predictable answer was post-2000 in the wake of Fast Track Land Reform. The correct answer was 1980, just after Zimbabwe’s independence, when he took up a consultancy post with the FAO – and proceeded to have a number of interesting encounters with the white farmers.

In similar vein, Joe Hanlon and colleagues begin their recent book *Zimbabwe Takes Back Its Land* with these words:

The war was over and returning veterans who wanted to farm were given land; roads were built to the farms; seed, fertilizer, and implements were provided; and 40 ha of land were plowed for the farmers before they arrived. For those without farming experience, two years of training in farming and financial management was available. Much of the land was already occupied, so the existing farmers were forced off – often loaded into lorries and simply dumped far away, while their homes were burned. It was 1945-47 in Rhodesia, and the veterans were from the Second World War.<sup>1</sup>

So, in Zimbabwe and elsewhere, it really does matter when you begin your (hi)story.

---

<sup>1</sup> Joseph Hanlon, Jeanette Manjengwa & Teresa Smart, *Zimbabwe Takes Back Its Land* (Sterling, Va., Kumarian Press, 2013), 1.

## 2. THE ACADEMIC WORLD, 1960-84

### a. *Universities in Southern Africa*

Trying to reflect a little on the Lionel I knew and his career got me thinking about my own working career. I recognize that I have been exceptionally fortunate to have spent almost all my working life doing full-time jobs which I thoroughly enjoyed and in which it wasn't too difficult to persuade myself that I was doing something vaguely useful. But it could all have been very different.

In late 1959 I was set to study history at the University of Manchester. But at the last minute, because someone failed his or her A levels, I was awarded a Kingsley Fairbridge scholarship to study at the University College of Rhodesia and Nyasaland (UCRN), now the University of Zimbabwe, which was then an external college of the University of London. There 11 other History Honours students and I had inspirational history teachers in Terence Ranger, Eric Stokes and Richard Brown. (6 of us subsequently got PhDs – not a bad strike record). I enjoyed a very broad and highly stimulating education both on and off the campus. On campus our lecturers invited to our Saturday morning seminars the likes of Clyde Mitchell, Jaap van Velsen, Kingsley Garbett, Giovanni Arrighi, Lewis Gann and Nathan Shamyuyarira. It was a pretty good example of an inter-disciplinary approach! Off campus I played football in black areas and cricket in white areas of what was a deeply segregated country (a special law had to be passed to create a multiracial area for the university campus). Richard Gray, our external examiner, wrote an excellent book about Rhodesia entitled (echoing Disraeli) *The Two Nations*. After the confines of a dreadful English boarding school, I quickly fell in love with Rhodesia and had a strong sense of re-inventing myself. I liked many of the black and white Rhodesians I met and found it strange that they generally didn't like each other! I did a fair bit of hitch-hiking around both what were then Southern and Northern Rhodesia.

It was quite impossible to ignore the politics. The ill-conceived Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland (1953-63) was broken up by nationalist pressures in Nyasaland and Northern Rhodesia, which became independent in 1964 as Malawi and Zambia. In Southern Rhodesia, the right-wing Rhodesian Front came to power in December 1962, determined to preserve white supremacy dressed up as 'western Christian civilization'. Its leader Ian Smith made his infamous Unilateral Declaration of Independence from Britain on 11 November 1965.

I graduated at the end of 1963. A while earlier Eric Stokes, for whom I had done some research on Harry Johnston in a long vacation, asked if I had considered doing a PhD. He thought I had the ability. (That was a very good lesson for when I became a lecturer myself). I hadn't thought about it but, after reflecting a little, it seemed not a bad idea. I'm not sure if I were fit for much else! What to study? Richard Gray suggested I took a look at the history of land in Rhodesia. I did and pretty soon realized that it would make an excellent subject for a PhD. Though my mother was a very keen gardener and my father enjoyed working on his London allotment, my own interest in land thus far was limited to picking strawberries in Kent in the summer.

In 1964, when I started work on my PhD, it would have been quite easy for someone who knew nothing of the country's history and who travelled around the white farming areas and the black native reserves to have drawn totally erroneous

conclusions about many things, including the capacities of white and black farmers. I set about researching that history. The context was one of increasing racism. Roy Welensky was magically transformed from Rhodesian hero to dirty Jew. I went along and barracked a number of Rhodesian Front parliamentary candidates. The threat of UDI loomed large. The British Government publicly ruled out a military response – a disastrous error. UDI duly came, and just a month later I received a small brown envelope from the Ministry of Immigration, inside which was a very short letter telling me that my continued presence in Rhodesia was not conducive to the peace of the country, that my Temporary Employment Permit would not be renewed, and that I should therefore leave Rhodesia within 7 days. (Together with a number of other academics at the university, I had just signed a letter to *The Times*, saying that we neither recognised nor accepted the Smith regime's illegal UDI). The Immigration letter was something of a shock. The University appealed. The thing dragged on for a while, and I managed to cram about one year's research work in the National Archives into 3 months – the Archives staff very helpfully filmed lots of material for me – before finally being deported and later made a Prohibited Immigrant. So I came to London in 1966 (where I watched England win the World Cup) to complete the thesis. I finally did this in mid-1968. At my viva, Richard Gray began proceedings with a sentence I've never forgotten: 'we liked it'. So I could immediately relax and discuss issues from the thesis with my panel knowing that I had passed. Another good lesson for when I became an academic.

We lived close to Russell Square in a flat found for us by a friend of my mother's. It was a delightful setting but neither Judy, my Rhodesian wife, nor I wanted to be in London. We both wanted to get back to Africa and I rather fancied the idea of being an historian of Africa. So, when in the same week in early 1969 I received a job offer first from California State University, Long Beach and then from the University of Malawi, I had no hesitation in choosing the latter.<sup>2</sup> Had I chosen the former, it's quite possible that I might have spent the rest of my working life as an academic. But I've never regretted choosing Malawi.

I went to the University of Malawi (1969-71) and then the University of Zambia (1971-7) at starting salaries of £1,760 and £2,200 per annum respectively! Those were really exciting times to be an historian of Africa. Countries were newly independent needing new histories, as colonialists had frequently proclaimed that Africa had no history. The universities were also new, unconstrained by tradition. It was a brave new world. I really enjoyed the combination of teaching, researching and writing. It was brilliant to be able to teach students about current research which my colleagues were undertaking. People like Martin Chanock, Leroy Vail, Neil Parsons and Gervase (later William!) Clarence-Smith were writing really interesting, original stuff. None of us had to squeeze our research into narrow gaps bequeathed by many predecessors. It was also great not to have to wear a tie, though there were curious dress restrictions in Malawi.<sup>3</sup> Also publishers, such as James Currey, then of

---

<sup>2</sup> I was interviewed in London at the Inter-University Council for Higher Education Overseas of blessed memory (1946-86), but I was not required to demonstrate any evidence that I could actually teach! I had in fact taught A level history while a PhD student at UCRN which ran a programme to help black Zimbabweans obtain A levels in order to gain entrance to the college.

<sup>3</sup> At the university men were not allowed to wear 'multi-coloured shirts.' This was because 'Java prints', as they were called, were deemed (correctly) to indicate sympathy for Tanzania.

Heinemann, who signed me up twice, came banging on your university door to ask what you were writing and enquire whether they might publish it, which was incredibly motivating.

I think I was a pretty good lecturer. I certainly enjoyed it hugely and generally got positive feedback. But I'm very glad my students didn't possess smartphones or laptops! A sense of humour helped and I also think I learnt from students in tutorials the ability to listen to other points of view and engage in constructive dialogue. In Zambia, the National Archives agreed to publish research papers which my final year students wrote in a *Zambian Land and Labour Studies* series, which I thought was a pretty smart idea. They cost 40 ngwee (20 pence). For some years I compiled the research newsletter, *History in Zambia*, stuck it in envelopes and posted it off far and wide. Also extremely valuable were the annual social science conferences held in East Africa but including universities in Southern Africa. Here you met people from many disciplines and learnt a lot about their current research. I first attended one in 1969, which led to a chapter in a book edited by Alan Ogot.<sup>4</sup> In a subsequent one, a wicked timetabler – could it possibly have been Lionel? – decreed that the afternoon session began with papers by Donald Crummey, followed by Michael Twaddle and then John Tosh!

The local context was of course critical. While Hastings Banda's Malawi proclaimed its neutrality,<sup>5</sup> Kenneth Kaunda's Zambia was a key Front Line State in the struggle against the 'white south' – South Africa, Rhodesia, South-West Africa, Portuguese West and East Africa. I didn't need Lionel Cliffe as a neighbour in Lusaka to tell me which side of that struggle I was on – but no doubt it helped! And that context deeply affected my academic work. The University of Zambia (UNZA) in the 1970s was a pretty liberating place in many ways. There were no stupid disciplinary barriers between staff (similar to my experience at UCRN), at week-ends we got out into the country to meet correspondence students (who were in full-time employment), while UNZA and Zambia hosted students and refugees from virtually every country in the region. I also had the great luxury of knowing that I was not going to be there for life, that an important part of my job was to train up Zambians to replace me.

Remembering Eric Stokes' example, I found that a word of encouragement at the start of a student's final year about their potential for post-graduate work could produce striking results. So there was no greasy career pole to waste my time climbing up. This was also something which happened to me later with Oxfam, which I joined too old (at 46) to be a career threat to anyone. This has been extraordinarily liberating and given me the space to be radical and outspoken on the odd occasion. As my friend and former Oxfam colleague Judy Adoko once wrote: 'I read your presentation at FAO. You speak the truth but how many of us can do so without fear of reprisals?' There is an important issue here.

---

<sup>4</sup> Robin H. Palmer, 'War and Land in Rhodesia in the 1890s', in Bethwell A. Ogot (Ed), *War and Society in Africa* (London, Frank Cass, 1972), 85-107.

<sup>5</sup> There were some interesting teaching moments in Malawi: students suddenly pricked up their ears when I mentioned how Napoleon surrounded himself with praise-singers; when lecturing on post-independent East Africa, I enjoyed reading from Nyerere's *Education for Self-Reliance*; and I was amused that I managed to get past the draconian Board of Censors a set book *The Age of Revolution* by the dangerous Marxist Eric Hobsbawm! My final year in academia was 1983-4, when I was Visiting Professor of History at the University of Malawi, and was obliged to sit beneath a large portrait of the Life President, Ngwazi Dr H. Kamuzu Banda.

### ***b. My Academic Writing***

Nobody writes in a vacuum. The context in which I was researching, teaching and writing was of a region polarised politically along racial lines. In terms of land and agriculture, what I observed as an undergraduate and cricket and football player in Rhodesia was a countryside rigidly divided on racial lines. In the sparsely-populated highlands around the capital, you had huge, manicured family farms of 3,000 acres owned by whites, many of them recent (post-1945) arrivals, and often growing tobacco, which had a guaranteed market in Britain, which could not afford to buy American tobacco after 1945. They relied on cheap farm labour. They seemed the very picture of modern, progressive farming. Young would-be white farmers trained scientifically at the local Gwebi Agricultural College.

Beyond these white highlands, the bulk of the country's black population lived in what were called, quite accurately, native reserves. These were by contrast densely populated, held under some form of customary ownership through chiefs, and were often badly eroded, evoking a sense of crisis. A casual observer of these *Two Nations* might reasonably deduce that white Rhodesians were excellent farmers, while their black compatriots were utterly hopeless. And such an observer might draw similar conclusions from right across Southern Africa. But that would ignore the history. And it was that history which I and others were concerned to write. And in that writing we sought to demonstrate that peasants can do it – as they had done it in the past.

What that history revealed was that a huge amount of social engineering and political repression had gone into creating the situation of 1960. When whites began pushing into the interior of Southern Africa in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century in search of mineral wealth, they created many new markets. And it was overwhelmingly black peasant farmers who responded positively to those markets, as Neil Parsons and I demonstrated in a famous edited collection 37 years ago, *The Roots of Rural Poverty in Central and Southern Africa* (London, Heinemann, 1977), over half of the contributors to which were based at the University of Zambia. The fly-leaf on that book captures very well what we were trying to do:

Why are African nations so poor today? In this book historians of a new generation [i.e. young people!] look back and rediscover the history of peasant prosperity and subsequent impoverishment in the eleven states from Zaire [now DR Congo] to South Africa. They question the conventional wisdom of many development planners who have blamed poverty on the stagnant traditionalism of rural Africans. This is social history with economic and political dimensions, examining the impact of capitalism and colonialism on rural societies. Here is historical evidence that has too often been ignored and forgotten. This history has profound significance to students of all branches of social science, and for everyone concerned with understanding the present and planning the future of Central and Southern Africa.

In my book of the same year, *Land and Racial Domination in Rhodesia* (London, Heinemann, 1977), drawn from my PhD, I also demonstrated that when mining in Rhodesia failed to develop as profitably as Cecil Rhodes had hoped, his governing (private) British South Africa Company decided to attract white settler farmers to the country. And so began a long process which involved the grabbing of the best land, the eviction of blacks into outlying native reserves further from markets, the creation of infrastructure to support the settlers, the heavy subsidisation of white farmers, controlled and segregated markets for maize, and the granting of political power to

the white settlers and with it the ability to defend their economic interests. Similar processes took place elsewhere in Southern Africa.

We wrote about this hidden peasant history both because it was important in its own right, but also, as we said in the introduction to *Roots*, explicitly to challenge a number of white myths about African agriculture. Sadly, many of these myths are still alive and well in South Africa and Zimbabwe today.

What this all closely resembles in microcosm is today's divided world of highly subsidised and protected farmers in Western Europe and North America and farmers in the developing world who have had such subsidies and protection that they might once have enjoyed stripped away, first by structural adjustment programmes, and then by the post-Cold War dogma that for some parts of the world the magic of the free market will suffice and provide for all. I often remind myself of that history when I hear people like Paul Collier say that there is now no place in the world for small-scale farmers.

One consequence of this has been that when Southern Africa was finally liberated, with no thanks to the West, would-be black farmer beneficiaries of land reform in South Africa were denied the kinds of support which historically had gone to their white counterparts. Much of this history has been conveniently forgotten. But having researched it does make me a trifle sceptical when I encounter biofuel promoters and others talking glibly about how easy it will be to create large new commercial plantations all over Africa.

Those 2 books received generally very positive reviews and have continued to be widely cited and admired; indeed I received a very moving accolade about one of them recently from Brian Raftopoulos, a brilliant organic intellectual and courageous human rights campaigner from Zimbabwe, who I respect deeply. He wrote: 'Your work on the land issue in Zimbabwe was one of the first books I bought when I got to London in the 1970's and it remains a steady star in my intellectual sky.'

One final reflection about my academic career is that it was probably a good thing that I got out in time with my reputation intact! If I'd stayed in academia I would probably have lost my excitement and enthusiasm, grown stale, perhaps rehashed old material or churned out inferior stuff and so exhausted my earlier credit. Instead, I stumbled, eventually, into another career in which my particular academic background and some of the skills I had acquired and contacts I had made were to prove invaluable.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> I talked about this to Brian Raftopoulos, when we met at the Britain Zimbabwe Society research day this June. He said that he believed that his academic background was critical in strengthening his activist work as a civil society analyst. He is very glad that he was not stuck in an academic career; it was good to play a variety of roles. We agreed on that.

### 3. THE NGO WORLD, 1987-2007

#### **a. Oxfam's Southern Africa Desk**

When I taught at both the University of Malawi and the University of Zambia I had absolutely no contact with, or knowledge of, the NGO world. So, after my family and I settled in Britain and I failed to find an academic job – these were the Thatcher years – it never occurred to me to look for a job in the NGO world. My only contact with Oxfam had been with its Press Officer, Paddy Coulter, for researching the book Paul Harrison and I wrote in 1986, *News out of Africa: Biafra to Band Aid* (London, Hilary Shipman), which told the stories of famines in Biafra and Ethiopia. Among others we interviewed Frederick Forsyth, Jonathan Dimbleby and Michael Buerk about how they covered those events as journalists.<sup>7</sup> I was pretty pessimistic at the time about declining media interest in Africa, outside of famine stories. One of my lesser known publications is 'Are we fed up with famine?', *Good Housekeeping*, December 1986, 55. It was my sole appearance in that magazine!

In autumn 1986, firmly prompted by my wife, I started a PGCE course in London in order to qualify as a school teacher and earn some money! In early 1987 I saw a job advertised by Oxfam. They were looking for a Desk Officer for Zambia, Zimbabwe and the SADC region. (I learned later that this was a newly created job on the back of money pouring in following the Band Aid phenomenon). I was duly interviewed. I confessed that I knew nothing about development. They said that doesn't matter, you can learn, but you do know a lot about Zambia, Zimbabwe and the SADC region. I got the job, which was an enormous relief. It was essentially a communications job which played to my strengths. It involved travelling a lot in Southern Africa, meeting Oxfam staff and the local partners they supported, learning about their work, writing tour reports (which were actually read by the Director, Frank Judd) and talking to Oxfam supporters in local offices in the UK. It was absolutely fascinating work and a huge learning experience about primary health care, the disability movement and a great deal else. Oxfam was then funding doctors in Manicaland, Zimbabwe, to promote primary health care ('health for all by the year 2000'). It was the time of the emergence of HIV and AIDS. One of the doctors told me later that the Minister of Health had threatened that if anyone mentioned AIDS they would be on the first plane out of the country. Oxfam's Southern Africa Desk was a great place to work. The organization had withdrawn its bank account from Barclays because of the bank's links with apartheid South Africa. It said that apartheid had created poverty, which irritated the then extremely conservative Charity Commissioners, and it was soon to launch its Front Line Africa campaign, calling unequivocally for the liberation of Southern Africa. It was quietly and discretely funding the ANC and SWAPO.<sup>8</sup> Its leaders, Peter Wiles, pictured in *A House in Zambia* demonstrating outside the South

---

<sup>7</sup> I subsequently wrote an article 'Africa in the Media', published in *African Affairs*, **86**, 343, April 1987, 241-7. This was based on a symposium I had organized for the ASAUK on 'The Media and Africa since Independence: past trends and future prospects' which attracted an audience of 70, divided equitably between those working in the media, in academe and the less privileged. A major objective was to bring together a range of people from diverse backgrounds who shared an interest in and concern for Africa and whose paths would not normally cross.

<sup>8</sup> See my 'Oxfam's Support to the ANC in Zambia in the 1980s' in Robin Palmer (Ed), *A House in Zambia. Recollections of the ANC and Oxfam at 250 Zambezi Road, Lusaka, 1967-97* (Lusaka, Bookworld Publishers, 2008), 45-9.



African Embassy, and later Odhiambo Anacleti, a Tanzanian, were truly inspirational figures. There was also a very interesting Africa Committee (and similar committees for Latin America etc.) which is where the Country Representatives would come to present their annual reports. Many members of those committees were academics and I found it extremely helpful to be working with committed young academics like Ken Wilson (in Zimbabwe) and Megan Vaughan (in Malawi and Zambia). My colleague Ian Leggett, who covered East Africa, worked with Deborah Bryceson. (They had both previously worked in Tanzania). I feel certain that the academics also valued these connections. It got them access to interesting people, interesting work – and transport. Occasionally I had difficulty persuading a Southern African Oxfam colleague that academics could actually be useful and practical, but original doubts were quickly dissipated by what these particular academics had to offer. Sadly, when Oxfam moved to set up regional offices overseas in the late 1990s, these committees were done away with and have never been adequately replaced. Thereafter linking with academics had to be done on an ad hoc basis, which can be fine of course, but the committee structure was a very helpful vehicle.

Oxfam made one specific policy intervention on land at the national level in 1989/90. This came about in the context of the Front Line Africa campaign which sought to illustrate the destruction being wrought across the region by South Africa in its notorious (and genteelly worded) policy of ‘destabilisation’, and to argue the case for sanctions against South Africa. In Zimbabwe, the 10-year constraints imposed by the Lancaster House Constitution of 1979 were about to come to an end, and Peter Nyoni, Oxfam’s Country Representative, decided that there was a need for some shaking up. So, on the basis of my academic track record, he asked me<sup>9</sup> to come to Zimbabwe, interview key members of the Zimbabwean Government, and write a review of the first decade of land reform. This I did. The government people I spoke to were clearly alarmed that the British Government, whose continued support was critical for the land resettlement programme, was just going to walk away. My analysis became a chapter in Oxfam’s book *Front Line Africa: The Right to a Future* (1990) and was also published in *African Affairs* in April 1990 as ‘Land Reform in Zimbabwe, 1980-1990’. It has been much cited and I was later told that it was recommended reading for successive British High Commissioners going to Harare! The thrust of the article was highly critical of the Zimbabwean Government, for only paying serious attention to land issues when there was an election to be won, and of the British Government, for seeking to constrain any radical redistribution of land, which it seemed in those Cold War days to equate with Communism. The article concluded by warning that South Africa would be next in line for such constraining treatment.

The Desk Officer job lasted for 4 years, 1987-91. Right at the end there was a plan to send me to Zimbabwe for 6 months to work in the Oxfam office and finally learn something about development! But that was thwarted by a restructuring, the first of many I was to endure in Oxfam. In effect we Desk Officers became Regional Managers. I was ‘given’ Angola, Zambia, Malawi and Mozambique. This meant managing the Country Representatives who in effect had been managing me 5 minutes earlier! That job also lasted 4 years (1991-5) but management didn’t really play to my strengths. It was easy enough to ‘manage’ the joint Zambia/Malawi

---

<sup>9</sup> When I was appointed, Peter had asked ‘is he the historian Robin Palmer?’.

programme, which was arguably one of Oxfam's finest programmes anywhere,<sup>10</sup> but much harder when we struggled to find staff for Angola after the civil war resumed in late 1992. I had many rich experiences though, memorably travelling in Mozambique just 6 weeks after the end of the civil war,<sup>11</sup> also travelling upcountry in Angola, a country characterised by magic realism in the extreme,<sup>12</sup> during a brief ceasefire.

There were also interesting engagements with academics. Looking back, I am conscious of trying to use my academic contacts to help Oxfam staff. Given how difficult a place 'magic realism' Angola was, and how complex its history had been, I made a point of sending senior staff about to go there to talk to David Birmingham about the country and its challenges. On Mozambique there was a great deal of literature flying around in a wide variety of formats. I sent as much of this as I thought might be useful to the Oxfam office in Maputo for onward transmission to the provincial offices in Zambézia, Niassa and Cabo Delgado. I found Alex Vines' *Renamo Terrorism in Mozambique* (York, Centre for Southern African Studies, University of York, 1991) and ongoing research by Jocelyn Alexander and others extremely helpful in promoting a more nuanced understanding of Mozambican politics than the simplistic good versus evil solidarity material. Which is not to say of course that Renamo was not guilty of appalling crimes.

In January 1993, shortly after my visit to Mozambique, I gave a talk to the Royal African Society entitled *Mozambique: Peace, Rain and Lurching with Renamo*. There was a packed audience. I stressed the critical importance of bringing Renamo into the peace building process at all levels, and the absolute need to deal - and be seen to deal - even-handedly with Renamo and Frelimo. This was something we had all stressed during my recent visit, but it was sometimes difficult for some within the Mozambique Government and in the external solidarity movements to accept. Many had a somewhat one-dimensional view of the civil war which had just ended, and had failed to recognise that the war was often suddenly and brutally visited on local communities, who generally had no choice when it came to being press-ganged into one army or another. Or that while Renamo had certainly been created and initially sustained by racist Rhodesia and apartheid South Africa, it was later able to exploit significant abuses by Frelimo in its Marxist-Leninist mission that 'for the nation to be born, the tribe must die'. So I pressed this 'reconciliation and cementing the peace' line at all the inter-agency and other meetings I attended in the UK and elsewhere through 1993/4. An interesting illustration of this was the recruitment of a nurse to work in a Renamo demobilisation camp.

In 1995 this part of my Oxfam career came to an end following another restructuring. I then began work as an adviser on land rights.

---

<sup>10</sup> See my 'The Oxfam Desk Officer and Regional Manager', in *A House in Zambia*, 83-8.

<sup>11</sup> See my 'Peace in Mozambique 20 years ago', *Mokoro Newsletter*, 62, November 2012  
<http://www.mokoro.co.uk/files/13/file/RP%20newsletter.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> On a large map of Angola in my Oxfam office I was delighted to find a small place near the Zambian border called Macondo, the name of the fictional place depicted in Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.

## ***b. Land Rights***

### ***i. Introduction***

In the second half of my Oxfam career I worked as an adviser on land rights, predominantly in Southern and Eastern Africa. This was initiated through requests from Oxfam offices in Uganda and Tanzania (where Oxfam had sensitively supported the recent Shivji Commission in a variety of innovative ways),<sup>13</sup> strongly supported by Ian Leggett, for some dedicated Oxfam House support in a situation of new land laws and policies being strongly pushed by donors. The context was one of post-Cold War triumphalism. The donor (especially World Bank) answer on land was a simple one – privatisation. In this context, it was important to argue and demonstrate in those Reagan/Thatcher times that there was indeed an alternative.

It was a curious job in the sense that it was never secure. I had a long series of 6-month contracts; at one stage I had to undertake consultancies (in Zimbabwe, South Africa and Rwanda) in order to pay my salary, at another my salary was paid by DFID, which was nice for me but scarcely appropriate. I had moved out of Oxfam's International Division into another whose name was constantly changing but when I was retired in 2007 was called the Campaigns and Policy Division. Most of its members were very much focussed on activities within the headquarters, whereas I made it very clear that my focus was always outward, towards Oxfam country staff and, more importantly, partner organizations which Oxfam was supporting such as Haki Ardhi in Tanzania and the Uganda and Kenya Land Alliances. (Most Oxfam House policy people said why bother with land, it simply doesn't register with European audiences).

The job focused very much on research, information gathering and dissemination, awareness raising and advocacy in a wide variety of ways including much public

---

<sup>13</sup> In 1991 the Tanzanian Government appointed a Presidential Land Commission but could not afford to pay its costs. Its Chair, Issa Shivji (law professor at the University of Dar es Salaam), refused to accept money from World Bank. Oxfam, on being approached, agreed to fund it. It provided funds for the commission to travel around the country and to Kenya, Botswana and Zimbabwe to study comparable land/pastoralism problems. It funded publication of the final report, translation costs for a popular, shortened Swahili translation, and a publication launch.

In a move designed to counter possible strategies by those favouring privatisation, Oxfam disseminated the findings of the report (broadly that power over land should be vested in the people rather than with the central government) through a series of week-long, district level workshops with partners and church leaders, which the Chief Justice urged magistrates and legal officers to attend. These were publicised nationally every day on the radio and in the papers.

Oxfam knew a general election was coming, that the most sensitive issue was land and so sought to capitalise on this. It helped people to raise land issues with prospective MPs. It also helped Shivji prepare a national workshop with academics, politicians etc. and a delegation from this went to lobby the President.

In Oxford, at Shivji's invitation, Oxfam asked Gavin Williams and Judith Heyer, respected authors of *Rural Development in Tropical Africa* (1981) and hugely knowledgeable about East Africa, to submit a paper to the commission, in Oxfam's name, taking the side of the small and powerless against the large and greedy, and challenging many donor assumptions about the merits of large-scale farming.

Interview with Alfred Sakafu, Oxfam Country Representative, Tanzania, 10 July 1996.

speaking, TV and radio interviews and briefing of journalists. 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, like Lionel, could clearly potentially play a hugely helpful and constructive role.

My academic background, my historical knowledge and the contacts I had made in Africa and the UK were to prove critically important and helpful in this new role. After leaving the University of Zambia, I had spent time at Queen Elizabeth House, Oxford and been on the editorial board of the *Journal of Southern Africa Studies*. Reading through some of my old Oxfam reports again recently made it clear that a dominant theme in my work was finding ways of bringing academics and NGO people together to enhance advocacy on land rights for the poor. Closely related to this was disseminating information in a context in which governments are very rarely open. 3 early examples well illustrate this.

In November 1996, Gavin Williams (St. Peter's College, Oxford) and I organized a small workshop at Gavin's college on *Current Land Reform and Land Tenure Issues in Southern and Eastern Africa*. Gavin had recently been working on South Africa and was much concerned about World Bank manoeuvrings there.<sup>14</sup> I wrote at the time that:

The purpose of the workshop was to bring together academics and NGO workers interested in current issues of land policy and land reform in Southern and Eastern Africa. There were several reasons why this was a timely initiative:

- land is now an issue of wide concern and conflict (or potential conflict) and this needs to be more widely recognised
- legislation currently planned in several countries is likely to have serious and long-term consequences
- bridges can usefully be built between academics and NGOs working on land
- the South African experience needs to be situated within the broader context of Eastern and Southern Africa
- communities are being threatened by land grabbing and need to be supported

It was 'essentially an information sharing, consciousness raising exercise, designed to make people more aware of the seriousness of the situation.'<sup>15</sup> I think we were reasonably successful in this; I had lots of requests for copies of the report and it helped to expose South African researchers to developments beyond their borders, not least through the presence at the workshop of Lionel Cliffe!

Following this, I compiled a publication, *Contested Lands in Southern and Eastern Africa: A Literature Survey*. This was published as an Oxfam Working Paper in October 1997. It was 306 pages long and must clearly have involved an enormous amount of work. I wrote in my introduction:

---

<sup>14</sup> See e.g. 'Setting the agenda: a critique of the World Bank's 'Options for Land Reform and Rural Restructuring', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 23, 1, 1996, 139-166.

<sup>15</sup> See the report by Izzy Birch at [http://www.mokoro.co.uk/files/13/file/lria/workshop\\_current\\_land\\_issues\\_sothern\\_eastern\\_africa.pdf](http://www.mokoro.co.uk/files/13/file/lria/workshop_current_land_issues_sothern_eastern_africa.pdf)

There is now a vast literature on land in Africa; what follows is inevitably but a selection. My working principle of selection of the articles, books, theses, conference reports, NGO workshops etc. which I have summarised here has been to include items which are recent, are specifically relevant to current concerns, and/or are influential in one way or another.<sup>16</sup>

The introduction had sections on current context, major trends, key texts and key authors. It was very much conceived as sharing information for both activists and academics. There was a very positive response, including an invitation to run a session on land at a forthcoming conference of ASAUK.

A third critical initiative involved the internet. Information technology was of course on the move and, though not a natural techhie,<sup>17</sup> I could clearly see some of the opportunities inherent for the kind of networking job I was doing. I had been emailing stuff around Southern and Eastern Africa, where internet accessibility varied very greatly. I had already been asked to post some land rights items on the internal Oxfam website. With Oxfam colleagues I began to discuss the feasibility of creating a website specifically devoted to *Land Rights in Africa*. I felt strongly that there was a need to disseminate arguments in favour of pro-poor land reform in a context in which the rich and powerful tend to control both power and information. I got agreement on this and the site was eventually launched in January 2000. It continues to this day, though it moved in 2012 from Oxfam to Mokoro where it can be found at <http://www.mokoro.co.uk/land-rights-in-africa>.

In my original introduction in 2000 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.

---

<sup>16</sup> [http://www.mokoro.co.uk/files/13/file/lria/intro\\_contested\\_lands\\_southern\\_eastern\\_africa.pdf](http://www.mokoro.co.uk/files/13/file/lria/intro_contested_lands_southern_eastern_africa.pdf)

<sup>17</sup> Though in 1987, when I joined Oxfam, I was the first person there to use a computer, an Amstrad!

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.

The website was extremely well received on its inception and has been widely praised in subsequent years. It was conceived as a vehicle for giving a voice to the partners Oxfam was working with, such as the Kenya Land Alliance, and in subsequent years I sought to make it as strong as possible on Mozambique (because of its very important 1997 *Lei de Terras*), on the critical issue of women's land rights and, since 2007, on the 'new' global land grab and its threat to Africa. The website provides a useful record of debates on land rights over the past 14 years.

Anyone working on land rights in Africa clearly needs both passion and a sense of injustice about the way things are and a strong desire to want to change them. Without that, I don't believe you can achieve very much. My own experience has been that individuals are critically important, and so you seek out like-minded allies you can trust with whom you can work in productive ways. You do this across institutional boundaries. In this way, I was able, to put it crudely, to get free advice to Oxfam's advantage from a wide range of outstanding people such as Okoth-Ogendo, Patrick McAuslan and of course Lionel.

The land rights work was generally deliberately quiet, low key and low profile, indeed almost invisible in Oxfam House, and opportunistic where appropriate. Much of it was a struggle, in all senses of the word, against powerful elites, the private sector and agencies such as USAID. The *leitmotiv* of my own role might be best summed up in the somewhat pretentious title of an article I wrote in 2003, 'Struggling to Secure and Defend the Land Rights of the Poor in Africa'.<sup>18</sup>

I want now to discuss 3 aspects of this work to illustrate important themes: (i) women's land rights, (ii) working with Zimbabwean researchers in the 'new resettlement areas' post-Fast Track Land Reform, and (iii) land and property rights in post-tsunami Aceh.

## ***ii. Women's Land Rights***

When I started working on land for Oxfam, I was situated within the Gender and Learning Team, so I could scarcely avoid working on women's land rights! Indeed, one of the categories in my 1997 *Contested Lands* book was 'land and women' (the others were tenure, reform, pastoralism and misc). In my brief introduction I wrote:

On land and women, the most recent general collection is by Jean Davison (1988), while the work of Fiona Mackenzie on Kenya is particularly worth noting, as is Bina Agarwal's book on South Asia, which is of universal relevance. Shamin Meer's recent collection of South African

---

<sup>18</sup> *Journal für Entwicklungspolitik* (Austrian Journal of Development Studies), **XIX**, 1, 2003, 6-21.

case studies also contains much that is of wider relevance. Many items not specifically placed in the sections on land and women nevertheless address gender issues.<sup>19</sup>

In the context of the push for privatisation and the appalling threat of HIV and AIDS, it was pretty obvious that women's already somewhat fragile rights to land would come under increasing threat. And so it proved. In an article published in 1999 in *Gender & Development*, Kaori Izumi, then a Visiting Assistant Professor at Roskilde University, Denmark, where she had recently completed her PhD, wrote:

Land policy has become increasingly concerned with accommodating the free market, leading to a shift in focus from issues of poverty-alleviation, equity, and livelihoods to economic efficiency and investment. In this context, gender analysis of debates over land is one of the most neglected issues in research and policy debates. The mainstream theories regarding land issues in Africa are gender-blind, and this is reflected in the formulation of land policy and land law, which ignore the particular interests and needs of women.

'Further research is urgently required' she added, as researchers invariably do!<sup>20</sup>

HIV and AIDS clearly impacted on the work of development agencies such as Oxfam, which had the wisdom to appoint Dan Mullins to work full time on the issue. In March 2000 we wrote a short note together, part of which said:

A vast literature contains very little mention of the likely future impact of HIV/AIDS on land, livelihoods or production. This is something that needs redressing urgently. The SADC region of Southern Africa is now home to at least one third of the global population of people living with HIV. About 12 per cent of the adult population of Southern Africa is now infected with HIV. As a consequence there and elsewhere in Africa we are beginning to see the following patterns emerging:

- At the household level, people who fall sick with HIV/AIDS are less and less able to work productively.
- So family members begin to devote more time to caring for them.
- So they devote less time to vital seasonal agricultural activities (e.g. planting or weeding).
- When people become sick, vital physical and social assets like cattle or tools are depleted or sold off as they or their families draw on their savings to pay for expensive medical care and then funerals, and for the hire of replacement labour.
- Once such productive assets are sold (often for artificially low prices), people's future range of activities is reduced.
- People's options become more limited.
- So they become increasingly vulnerable.
- Productivity declines in those activities still undertaken.
- People in the most productive age group die off before they can pass on their experience and specialist skills (formal and informal) to the next generation.
- In these processes women are especially vulnerable:
  - (a) to infection by their husbands;
  - (b) as widows, to landlessness and near destitution following property grabbing by her husband's relatives - a 'custom' still prevalent in many parts of Africa.
- A widow is left to eke out a living without her land base or other assets.
- She becomes vulnerable to opportunistic illnesses.
- Those left to farm and earn income are disproportionately the elderly and children.

---

<sup>19</sup> [http://www.mokoro.co.uk/files/13/file/Iria/intro\\_contested\\_lands\\_southern\\_eastern\\_africa.pdf](http://www.mokoro.co.uk/files/13/file/Iria/intro_contested_lands_southern_eastern_africa.pdf)

<sup>20</sup> Kaori Izumi, 'Liberalisation, gender, and the land question in sub-Saharan Africa', *Gender & Development*, 7, 3, April 1999, 15.

As a consequence, subsistence farming gradually is becoming less and less productive, especially in drier areas and in commodities which need high labour inputs. In terms of land tenure reform, there is a real danger, where the opportunity and the temptation exist, that people might sell their land (together with their other assets) to pay for fruitless health care or costly funerals. The spectre of possible growing landlessness associated with HIV/AIDS should, at the very least, give serious pause for thought to those who still advocate that individual titling is the best, or indeed the only, way forward for land reform.

Conclusion: this situation, clearly leading both to deeper poverty and increased inequity, calls for policy and practice changes of the most basic and fundamental nature.<sup>21</sup>

A glance at the Southern Africa section of the *Land Rights in Africa* website from 2002 onwards reveals the quickening pace of research in this area.

A really critical event was the appointment of Kaori Izumi as FAO's Land Tenure Officer for Southern and Eastern Africa. Based in Harare, Kaori held this post from 2000 to 2007. In a piece 'Remembering Kaori Izumi', written after her death from cancer last year, I wrote that Kaori

did truly amazing work during those 7 years. She felt passionately about the position of widows and orphans who were having their property grabbed by relatives in the name of 'custom'. She made it her business to get out of her office, to meet women and some of the organisations trying to help them. She saw injustice at first hand and felt impelled to fight to make the world a better place. As she wrote:

What struck me was not only the brutality of their experiences of being evicted and losing their property, and the destitution that had followed, but also the resilience of these women and children, who were determined to struggle for their survival with dignity, providing support to other women and children in similar situations. The meetings with these women and children motivated me to organise workshops where some of them told their stories.

Kaori was a mover and shaker who really did make a difference in the lives of others. She was always up for a challenge and was never daunted, however strong the obstacles. She learnt about some inspiring initiatives and innovative responses to the situation, and she found sensitive and imaginative ways of sharing those responses in ways that might help others, for example the Memory Books created for orphans to remember their parents, and the work of the victim support unit of the police in Zambia. She also collected many personal testimonies of orphans and of women living with HIV and she encouraged them to come to her workshops to tell their stories. This was often incredibly moving. She was forever focusing on the practical – what could be done to help people in a particular context and the need to get support to them at the right time. And she was not slow in banging on doors to urge people to make things happen. Everyone who worked closely with her felt inspired by her commitment and her passion. Importantly, we also had a lot of laughs along the way.<sup>22</sup>

The most memorable conference or workshop I have ever attended was the one which Kaori and I organized in Pretoria in June 2003 on *Women's Land Rights in Southern and Eastern Africa*.<sup>23</sup> It was extraordinary successful and has lived long in

---

<sup>21</sup> Robin Palmer and Dan Mullins, 'The Future Impact of HIV/Aids on Land in Africa', Oxfam, March 2000 [http://www.mokoro.co.uk/files/13/file/lria/future\\_impact\\_hiv\\_aids\\_on\\_land.pdf](http://www.mokoro.co.uk/files/13/file/lria/future_impact_hiv_aids_on_land.pdf)

<sup>22</sup> [www.mokoro.co.uk/newsletters/14](http://www.mokoro.co.uk/newsletters/14)

<sup>23</sup> <http://www.mokoro.co.uk/files/13/file/lria/wlrseareport.pdf>



the memory of many who attended not least because we quite consciously invited a wide range of people and organisations – including NGO, grassroots, government and UN people, researchers, activists and lawyers, and two Ugandan women living with HIV. There was considerable interest in the work of the women lawyers' association, FIDA <http://fidakenya.org/> and its use of paralegals doing 'first aid in law' resolving disputes and trying, among many other things, to prevent women/widows being dispossessed of land and other resources by their husbands or his relatives. While the important role that litigation and test cases (as in South Africa) can play was acknowledged, there was also scepticism about the role that law can play in changing realities on the ground, and much discussion of non-law strategies based at the local level. Mediation was discussed as a possible alternative to legal aid.

We all agreed that the workshop should not just be a one off, but that it should create ways in which individuals and organisations could continue to inform and learn from each other, generate best practices, share knowledge of pilots and replications, and create innovative ways of doing this. One thing that happened immediately was the establishment of a list server [womenslandrights@oxfam.org.uk](mailto:womenslandrights@oxfam.org.uk) originally confined to workshop participants, but subsequently broadened and still going strong 11 years later! It was the first time that Oxfam had opened up such space to 'outsiders'.

Nobody underestimated the difficulties of achieving concrete gains in this highly contested area, but the workshop helped to clarify many issues, and also to build solidarity, reinforce commitment and identify future priorities. Kaori went on to organize a series of quite extraordinary workshops in 2004-6<sup>24</sup> and to fund a number of research initiatives e.g. by Cheryl Walker in Kenya and Nelson Marongwe in Zimbabwe, and also found time to publish herself.<sup>25</sup>

Another consequence of the Pretoria workshop, in which I was deeply involved, was the publication – which took a very long time – in 2008 of the outstanding *Women's Land Rights and Privatization in Eastern Africa*, edited by Birgit Englert and Elizabeth Daley (Woodbridge, James Currey). The two editors later combined to produce a special issue on securing land rights for women in the *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, 4, 1 (March 2010). The contributing authors to this included the Harvard academic Pauline Peters, who had been a colleague at the University of Malawi, and

---

<sup>24</sup> In January 2006 Kaori, whose health had suddenly broken down, asked me to step into her shoes and run a workshop in Lusaka on property grabbing from widows and orphans in Southern and Eastern Africa. For me, it was a memorable, highly moving event at which people told some real horror stories but also, especially some young orphans, spoke with quite breath-taking courage. The unspoken theme of the workshop was there are things that can be done, that there are ways of fighting back, and Kaori invited women and men from other countries precisely to demonstrate what was possible and to offer hope to people - which is a precious commodity, absolutely beyond measure.

<sup>25</sup> Kaori Izumi (ed), *Reclaiming our Lives. HIV and AIDS, Women's Land and Property Rights, and Livelihoods in Southern and East Africa. Narratives and Responses* (Pretoria, HSRC Press, 2006) [http://www.mokoro.co.uk/files/13/file/lria/reclaiming\\_our\\_lives\\_ebook.pdf](http://www.mokoro.co.uk/files/13/file/lria/reclaiming_our_lives_ebook.pdf)

Kaori Izumi (ed), *The Land and Property Rights of Women and Orphans in the Context of HIV/AIDS: Case Studies from Zimbabwe* (Pretoria, HSRC Press, 2006) [http://www.mokoro.co.uk/files/13/file/lria/land\\_and\\_property\\_rights\\_widows\\_and\\_orphans\\_zimbabwe.pdf](http://www.mokoro.co.uk/files/13/file/lria/land_and_property_rights_widows_and_orphans_zimbabwe.pdf)

the law professor Patrick McAuslan, who had invariably been extraordinary helpful whenever I called on him for advice.<sup>26</sup>

As someone whose academic work had been shamefully gender blind, working in this area has been a huge learning experience and one which well illustrates the need to marry good research with engaged and practical advocacy. I tried to capture that in my foreword to the Englert and Daley book:

Everywhere women who have struggled for security [of tenure] have been confronted by resistance and by patriarchy in its many forms. This is because in many parts of the world land is so often regarded as a symbol of male dominance, and for women to challenge the status quo is to challenge patriarchal control – and thus other social and political inequalities.

Women and men are embedded in a variety of social relations, networks and institutions. These can be absolutely critical for women in being able to lay claims on people. But as pressure on land begins to increase, as society become more individualised and the economy more privatized, notions of reciprocity and social safety nets within extended families are breaking down, again to the disadvantage of women. Clearly, HIV and AIDS is exacerbating this situation still further with disturbing consequences of property grabbing from widows and orphans.

Ways must urgently be found to help people acknowledge and face up to the painful realities of HIV and AIDS. It really is time to get rid of stigma and shame, while the attitude of blaming the widow for infecting the deceased husband and using this as an excuse for property grabbing should be stigmatised for what it is – a gross violation of human rights. Eastern Africa may well be ahead of Southern Africa in this respect.

To confront these difficult, highly sensitive issues requires many things.

- It requires social mobilisation and collective action of the kind described in India by Bina Agarwal.
- It requires awareness raising of rights that women may possess in theory but not enjoy in practice.
- It requires addressing gender seriously and integrally in all land policy, administration and reform initiatives, as even the World Bank has come to acknowledge, at least in theory.
- It requires political and legal will. It requires serious alliance building so that advances can be made on many fronts.
- It also requires the kind of detailed, local level research so ably represented in this fine and well-edited collection; research that can help both to challenge the status quo and to demonstrate that another world is possible.<sup>27</sup>

### ***iii. Working with Zimbabwean Researchers for Oxfam International, 2003-9***

I enjoyed a curious and totally unexpected re-engagement with Zimbabwe which began in July 2003, when I received a phone call out of the blue from Peter Struijff of Novib [Oxfam Netherlands], who I didn't know. Peter asked if I'd mind going to Zimbabwe to ask people a few questions about land!

---

<sup>26</sup> Martin Adams, Robin Palmer and Elizabeth Daley, 'Remembering Patrick McAuslan', *Mokoro Newsletter* 67, February 2014 <http://www.mokoro.co.uk/files/13/file/PMcAusalanjan2014.pdf>

<sup>27</sup> Robin Palmer. 'Foreword', Birgit Englert and Elizabeth Daley (eds), *Women's Land Rights and Privatization in Eastern Africa* (Woodbridge, James Currey), ix-xii.

The context was the famous land invasions of the Fast Track Land Reform Programme (FTLRP) led by war veterans though later claimed to have been initiated by Robert Mugabe. This drove many white farmers and many more black farm workers off the land as it took a political direction and got entangled in contestation for political power. It resulted in much brutality and suffering and a highly volatile and confused situation in the former white commercial farming areas and beyond. There had been extensive media coverage of this in Britain and, because of my past history, I had had a number of encounters with the media on this subject.<sup>28</sup> It goes without saying, as the responses to Ian Scoones' 2010 book<sup>29</sup> amply demonstrated, that it is virtually impossible to be neutral on this subject; there is little room for nuance or subtlety, still less an historical approach.

The 5 Oxfams who then worked in Zimbabwe asked me to 'undertake a brief scanning exercise among key actors in Zimbabwe on the current situation and likely future programming options in the new resettlement (fast track) areas'. I went to Zimbabwe in October 2003 and was given these 3 objectives:

1. to identify key actors who can contribute to analysis and policy development on the new resettlement areas, and to listen to their ideas;
2. on the basis of this brief survey, to identify the key issues which need to be addressed relating to the new resettlement areas;
3. to begin the process of developing a joint Oxfam-Zimbabwe advocacy response to issues in the new settlement areas, aimed at engaging international donors, policy makers and key Zimbabwean stakeholders.

As I wrote at the time, my background meant that

I had established a reputation and built up a range of contacts which I was able to 'exploit' (in the best sense of the word) on this occasion. The people who knew me were welcoming, and willing to accept my bona fides and my personal commitment to Zimbabwe and so to speak openly. I also found those who did not know me tended to respond favourably when I revealed some of this personal background.<sup>30</sup>

The situation then was that donors would not support work in the new resettlement areas (NRAs) 'arguing that to do so would legitimize a process which clearly flouted the rule of law and violated human rights'. It was clear that Oxfam International (OI) was contemplating working in the NRAs, wanting to identify priority needs and then perhaps to lobby other donors. They also grandly assumed that 'the composition and (inter)national legitimacy of the Zimbabwe government will change significantly within the next 6-24 months (i.e. by July 2005)'.

In my report I wrote that

fast track is now a *fait accompli*, a done deal, all, bar a few recalcitrant white farmers in their 'Vision for Agriculture', agreed. Politically, there will be no turning back of the clock to 2000.

---

<sup>28</sup> One was in January 2002 when Brian Raftopoulos and I talked to some 100 TV and radio journalists at the BBC shortly before the presidential elections in Zimbabwe. I made it clear that I was speaking as an individual and not as an Oxfam employee.

<sup>29</sup> Ian Scoones et al, *Zimbabwe's Land Reform Myths & Realities* (Woodbridge, James Currey, 2010).

<sup>30</sup> Robin Palmer, 'Future Land and Rural Development Policies in the new Resettlement Areas in Zimbabwe', Report for the OI Zimbabwe Coordination Group, 24 October 2003, 2-3.

Even a 'proper' election victory for the opposition MDC would not effect that. A line will have to be drawn, people agreed, and the new resettlement areas will become a political, social and economic reality – and one requiring our (in the broadest sense) attention. How that line is drawn, when, and by whom was the source of endless speculation, especially among the diplomatic community rendered idle by its lack of engagement with government.

On gendered land rights, I noted that

Nobody in Zimbabwe seems to be thinking about this very much! The people I met were overwhelmingly men. The women's land lobby group, many assert, has been hijacked by ZANU-PF. The infamous Magaya case symbolises the triumph of patriarchy. There is clearly a very serious gap here.

Rather to my surprise I found that

a significant number of people not only welcomed this initiative by OI as being helpful in terms of trying to focus attention on future priorities, but were positively encouraging in terms of using it as a means of bridge building between Zimbabweans across the political spectrum who are concerned about these issues.

So I recommended that Oxfam International 'sticks with the process it has begun, but does so in the full recognition of the need to be committed for the long haul. If any of the Oxfams feels unable to commit to that, it would make sense to withdraw at this stage.' In the event Oxfam America and Oxfam Australia withdrew, but Oxfam Canada, Oxfam Novib and Oxfam GB chose to engage. I was recruited as a go-between these 3 and a research team, led by Prosper Matondi, which was initially called the New Resettlement Areas Research Group (NRARG), and which would investigate changing livelihood patterns in some of the former white farming areas.

Over the next 6 years I worked with Prosper and his teams of (mostly) young researchers based at the Centre for Rural Development at the University of Zimbabwe. It was an extremely interesting and rewarding experience for me. It also provided an opportunity to pay back some of my immense debt to Zimbabwe. I told the researchers about my incredible learning experience at UCRN back in the early 1960s. The context in the 2000s, both in the country and at the university, could scarcely be greater. There was rampant inflation, economic meltdown, nothing in the shops and huge outmigration. In such a situation, where people had to 'make a plan' on a daily basis, I was constantly astonished and amazed to find that the young researchers I met wanted to do good, old-fashioned proper research. Somehow this desire had survived despite the huge economic meltdown. I can't imagine myself calmly proceeding with a PhD in such a context.

My work essentially involved meeting the researchers, talking to them about their work, then reading and commenting on their drafts. But there was one huge constraint. Someone with a white face would not have been welcome in the research areas in Mashonaland Central, Mazowe (very close to Harare and so ideal for the new weekend farmers) and Shamva, and so I never went there. I was however able to go to Mangwe in Matabeleland South in 2007 and found things incredibly normal there. I had the same kind of discussions with government officials there that I had had back in the 1980s. There was a local white family who had farmed there for 100 years and were keen to share and pass on their considerable local expertise to new black settlers with whom they were now required to share the land. They had

survived recent waves of land invasions because they had earned the respect of the local community. This provoked the obvious thought – why could this kind of land sharing not have taken place earlier, voluntarily and peacefully?

In August 2008 I wrote that

for Zimbabwe, this has been a year of well publicised ongoing political crisis and uncertainty since the March 29 elections, coupled with continuing economic meltdown, making day to day survival a battle for the majority. This has obviously made research, analysis and writing very difficult and has made it quite impossible, thus far, to use the findings of the research in any policy or advocacy work, since the space for that is currently not available. This has obviously been highly frustrating for all concerned.

Policy and advocacy work had certainly been a major priority for OI.

Lionel was also a regular visitor to Zimbabwe and we both tried to encourage all the researchers doing serious work to put past differences behind them and come together to help draw lessons from their research and offer well-grounded thoughts on future options. In 2010 he spent 2 months helping Prosper establish the newly-registered Ruzivo ('knowledge') Trust as a research and development organisation. He worked with Prosper's team of young men and women during the opening provided by the Government of National Unity (GNU). This was greatly appreciated. I had attended the launch of Ruzivo the previous September. It began with a hugely impressive seminar by Patience Mutopo and then some 35 researchers exchanged ideas and experiences and grappled with how as professionals, with their vast amount of collective experience, they could best serve their country in the new space which they believed was opening up. For me it was an inspiring sign, reminiscent of years gone by before the advent of the deeply divisive politics of the past decade.

In early 2009 I was asked to submit evidence to a British All-Party Parliamentary Committee looking at land reform in Zimbabwe. I concluded:

*Give space for local researchers to be heard*

If political space should open up soon in Zimbabwe, it will be very important, I strongly believe, for donors to avoid arriving with pre-packaged solutions, e.g. the UNDP's September 2008 *Comprehensive Economic Recovery* report. Rather, it will be important to recognise that there are groups of local researchers who have, against all the odds, been doing serious, committed research in some of the new resettlement areas. These research activities have been carried out independently but all have engaged with some of the practical problems of 'where do we go from here' when, finally, there is significant regime change. It will be critically important for these local researchers to be given the space, support and encouragement to come together to suggest concrete, pragmatic ideas, ways forward and priorities based on their detailed understandings of particular local contexts.

At much the same time Lionel wrote to Prosper and me, taking a very similar line:

Specifically what I have in mind is that it would be useful to bring together all evidence of what is happening on the ground after Fast Track, in particular to gather together what seem to be mainly local or regional case studies subsequent to the Parliament studies of 2003/4 – those CRD, AIAS, IDS-PLAAS have done plus maybe other researchers and even NGOs etc. My impression is that there is a lot of useful depth, but a spread that is patchy – gaps need to be identified before possible policy implications can be worked out. What would be useful would be to add to this list, but also to do a kind of mapping of where the case studies are, and to set this against some template (maybe Agro-ecological region) that will allow broader lessons to be brought out.

Sadly, Lionel did not live to see the necessary political change that would have made this possible.

Individuals do matter hugely in this kind of work. Peter Struijf of Novib had lived and worked in Zimbabwe and married a Zimbabwean. Jim MacKinnon of Oxfam Canada had a passionate commitment to Matabeleland. When the 3 of us went walking in the Matopos one Sunday morning, Jim amazed the local staff with his knowledge of Ndebele history. These two were the driving force in the OI work in Zimbabwe. Oxfam GB, with regular staff turnover, tagged along but gave good support. Keeping research capacity alive and functioning in Zimbabwe was really important and OI, which sensibly urged discretion about its funding role, deserve great credit for this

As I came to an end of this work in 2009, I lobbied hard for Oxfam to 'cross the line' and do non-emergency work in the new resettlement areas. This was, after all, what OI had intended when they asked me to act as an adviser to the researchers. To the best of my knowledge this has still not happened. A Luta Continua.

While national level advocacy work never proved possible, Prosper was able to publish much of the research work in his excellent *Zimbabwe's Fast Track Land Reform* (London, Zed Books, 2012). This included a chapter sadly entitled 'a revolution without change in women's land rights'. He also somehow found the energy to co-edit, with Kjell Havnevik and Atakilte Beyene, the very fine *Biofuels, Land Grabbing and Food Security in Africa* (London, Zed Books, 2011).

#### ***iv. Land and Property Rights in post-tsunami Aceh***

I was badly caught out by the aftermath of the Indian Ocean tsunami of Boxing Day 2004. This provoked an unprecedented public response in the UK and I joined the many Oxfam staff who volunteered to answer phone calls from the public in the following days. I had seen the TV pictures and listened to the stories from the disaster. But it never occurred to me that there could be serious land and property issues on which Oxfam might work following such a disaster. This despite the fact that I had good exposure to emergency / humanitarian work as manager of the Oxfam Country Representatives in war-torn Angola and Mozambique, and more recently in ongoing work on vulnerable livelihoods with colleagues working in the food security section of Oxfam's Humanitarian Division. I still find it hard to understand my failure, as I explained at a session, chaired by Lionel, of a 2008 conference on *Uncharted territory: Land, conflict and humanitarian action* organized by ODI's Humanitarian Policy Group.<sup>31</sup> This is what actually took place:

A conversation took place in Geneva on 5 January 2005, just 10 days after the tsunami disaster in the Indian Ocean. It was suggested off the record to Oxfam International by a UNOCHA official that we might want to take a close look at land and property rights in the affected areas. These issues, it was felt, might well become 'a major headache' during the reconstruction phase, 'when the risk of tourism developers moving in on people's homes will increase' and it was feared that people's land rights might be completely ignored in the immediate UN and government responses.

---

<sup>31</sup> ODI, HPG 'Uncharted territory: Land, conflict and humanitarian action: report of a conference', 7 February 2008, 14 <http://www.odi.org.uk/hpg/meetings/land-conference-note.pdf>

So, on 7 January 2005, I (then Oxfam GB's Global Land Adviser) was asked by Phil Bloomer (then OGB's Head of Advocacy) to 'look at this today, and give it 1-2 hours to see if this is something we should/could look at.' It took rather less than two hours of Internet searching to convince me that very serious issues were indeed at stake, and that the rights of poor and vulnerable communities could well be at risk during post-tsunami reconstruction.

In the event, under a grant from OGB's Research and Learning Fund, I asked Shaun Williams to carry out a short scoping review to identify key issues in order to help Oxfam – and hopefully others – respond most appropriately and effectively in both programme and advocacy work. Shaun is a vastly experienced land rights specialist, who had previously worked for Oxfam in a land study programme in Cambodia, and was familiar with many of the complex land rights issues in Asia. Inevitably, given the limited time, his review was 'quick and dirty', a snapshot of an evolving process. It covered pre- and post-tsunami property rights, made recommendations, and suggested opportunities for advocacy.<sup>32</sup>

I remained deeply involved with Oxfam's work on land rights in Aceh from its inception until my retirement in February 2007. I had in effect recruited the key actor, Lilianne Fan, and subsequently sought to impress on Oxfam's humanitarian managers in Aceh the critical importance of her advocacy work. We met at an Amnesty land rights lecture in the Sheldonian Theatre in Oxford in January 2005. I told the audience that we were conducting a scoping study on land rights in the tsunami-affected countries, and asked whether anyone could help us with this. Lilianne introduced herself. She was then a PhD student at Queen Elizabeth House. She comes from Malaysia and had extensive working contacts with Acehnese exiles there. She helped considerably with Shaun Williams' scoping study and within a month was working for Oxfam in Aceh in an imaginatively created advocacy post.

One of the strange things I discovered, when writing my 'history and celebration' in December 2007, was that Oxfam had not worked on land rights because of Oxford-driven events, as I had imagined, but because Lilianne on arrival had taken the time to sit down with Acehnese communities and organisations and ask them what were the issues of highest priority on which an international NGO might usefully work – and land and property rights had come out top of their list. How rarely is something so obvious done in the international NGO world – outsiders tend to come in thinking they know all the answers.

A critical feature of Oxfam's work in Aceh was its ability to work with a variety of other institutions and individuals at different times, and its very early recognition of the need for high quality, credible research to support advocacy. It came into early contact with the Australian academic, Daniel Fitzpatrick, a specialist in Indonesian law, who told me that he first became involved in land issues as a surfer in a conflict over rights of access to a beach! He also said that he had learned from experiences in East Timor that it was not the slightest use just writing a report, however good, and letting it rot in ministry files. That had taught him the need to turn research findings into programme designs and credible policy recommendations. He felt that a lawyer's training helped in this, but I think it is a very rare individual who is able to combine the two so effectively. In the event, Daniel wrote an initial report for Oxfam and UNDP in July 2005 which pointed the way on advocacy issues, and

---

<sup>32</sup> Robin Palmer, 'A History and Celebration of Oxfam's Land Rights Advocacy Work in Post-Tsunami Aceh, Indonesia, 2005-07', Mokoro 2007  
[http://www.mokoro.co.uk/files/13/file/oxfam\\_land\\_rights\\_advocacy\\_in\\_post\\_tsunami\\_aceh.pdf](http://www.mokoro.co.uk/files/13/file/oxfam_land_rights_advocacy_in_post_tsunami_aceh.pdf)

subsequently wrote 4 policy papers for Oxfam – on renters and squatters, resettlement, women’s land rights, and land administration.<sup>33</sup>

Renters and squatters were initially discriminated against as beneficiaries; one of the great triumphs of Oxfam’s advocacy work in Aceh was to focus on these forgotten, neglected people and keep banging away on this at the policy level until it was resolved more favourably. Daniel’s research, in identifying the numbers involved (which no one else had), was critical. Oxfam launched a multi-pronged strategy, including lobbying the office of UN Special Envoy Bill Clinton and TV, radio and press briefings. BRR (the Rehabilitation and Reconstruction Agency for Aceh and Nias) eventually changed its policy in January 2007, when renters and squatters became eligible for land and housing assistance. Oxfam also took up a number of local land cases and helped pull together a group of local NGOs which investigated some high profile cases involving the military and a palm oil company.

Then there was a curious encounter with the World Bank. The background was that I had engaged with the Bank’s Agriculture and Rural Development Department in 2005 over its excellent and highly practical research report, *Gender Issues and Best Practices in Land Administration Projects: A Synthesis Report*.<sup>34</sup> When I read it, I immediately thought of Lilianne as it seemed to have much to offer. So I wrote a detailed guide to it, posted it on the *Land Rights in Africa* website,<sup>35</sup> and asked one of the authors, Arumina Dhar, to make available on that website some highly useful sample questionnaires for data collection, designed to be adapted and modified to different contexts. Subsequently Lilianne and I directly lobbied the Bank’s gender specialists in Washington about the complete and scandalous failure of the high profile Bank-funded Rehabilitation of Aceh Land Administration System (RALAS) project to adhere to the Bank’s own gender guidelines, even on such basics as collecting gender-disaggregated data! Daniel Fitzpatrick repeatedly stressed this in

---

<sup>33</sup> Daniel Fitzpatrick, *Housing for the Landless: Resettlement in Tsunami-Affected Aceh, Indonesia*, Oxfam International Policy Paper and Aceh Research Institute, National University of Singapore, Aceh Working Paper No.1, November 2007  
<http://www.ari.nus.edu.sg/showfile.asp?pubid=732&type=2>

Daniel Fitzpatrick, *Access to Housing for Renters and Squatters in Tsunami-Affected Aceh, Indonesia*, Oxfam International Policy Paper and Aceh Research Institute, National University of Singapore, Aceh Working Paper No.2, November 2007  
<http://www.ari.nus.edu.sg/showfile.asp?pubid=733&type=2>

Daniel Fitzpatrick, *Women’s Rights to Land and Housing in Tsunami-Affected Aceh, Indonesia*, Oxfam International Policy Paper and Aceh Research Institute, National University of Singapore, Aceh Working Paper No.3, April 2008  
<http://www.ari.nus.edu.sg/showfile.asp?pubid=945&type=2>

Daniel Fitzpatrick, *Managing Conflict and Sustaining Recovery: Land Administration Reform in Tsunami-Affected Aceh*, Oxfam International Policy Paper and Aceh Research Institute, National University of Singapore, Aceh Working Paper No.4, April 2008  
<http://www.ari.nus.edu.sg/showfile.asp?pubid=946&type=2>

<sup>34</sup> [http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTARD/Resources/Gender\\_land\\_fulltxt.pdf](http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTARD/Resources/Gender_land_fulltxt.pdf)

<sup>35</sup> Robin Palmer, *A Guide to the World Bank’s Gender Issues and Best Practices in Land Administration Projects: A Synthesis Report*, August 2006  
[http://www.mokoro.co.uk/files/13/file/lria/wb\\_guide\\_gender\\_best\\_practices\\_land\\_admin.pdf](http://www.mokoro.co.uk/files/13/file/lria/wb_guide_gender_best_practices_land_admin.pdf)



his policy paper, which called for mandatory joint titling for all marital property being titled under the project. Oxfam continued to engage with the Bank, pressing it to match its rhetoric with practice on the ground – which, I believe, is an entirely appropriate role for an international NGO to play.

The gender dimensions of access to land and housing were a significant underlying theme in all Oxfam's land rights advocacy work in Aceh. This was not surprising in a complex legal context of a mix of Shari'a, adat (customary) and statutory law, of significantly more women than men dying in the tsunami, of difficult issues around inheritance and guardianship, and of conservative social and cultural pressures against women emerging after the tsunami. Oxfam supported a range of innovative legal awareness work through local and international NGOs and welcomed BRR's joint land titling policy for land acquired for resettlement.

I spent an extremely enjoyable month in Aceh in late 2007 interviewing key actors and writing a 'history and celebration'. I asked Lilianne to reflect back on her experiences of almost 3 years in Aceh and the lessons she had learned. She said that at the beginning it was important to take the time to try to understand e.g.

- what were the levers of change? (because it was neither automatic nor obvious);
- what is the climate you're working in? (because the entire context was changing around you all the time in a quickly shifting environment);
- where were the structures you wanted to influence?;
- where were the opportunities for change?; how could you affect them?; what did you have to do to prepare yourself?

She stressed that Oxfam's advocacy work in Aceh has been characterised by a very strong culture of engagement with authorities, with other agencies and with communities. She believed that Oxfam had to:

- not only use the new political space available and take advantage of the changes happening, but also create new space;
- recognise that things in Aceh had changed, and give change an opportunity to take hold <sup>36</sup>

In November 2006, Lilianne and I made a joint presentation on the advocacy work in Aceh to the World Bank. I concluded my introductory speech with the words:

Lilianne's advocacy work has also illustrated conclusively to my mind the value of looking seriously at land and property rights in ALL post-emergency situations – which is something I would commend to you all.

## ***v. Conclusion***

I began my closing speech to Oxfam in February 2007 with these words:

If I were retiring as an academic, I'd be dolled up in uncomfortable fancy dress, and I'd be doing a valedictory lecture for an hour, or two, or three, and you would not interrupt and would clap politely at the end. Then I'd go off to have a glass of warm sherry with the Vice-Chancellor. This will be different. I won't give a lecture as such. But nor mercifully will I make a PowerPoint presentation. I'll try to speak, rather than read. There will be a certain amount of son et lumière, a little bit of film, and hopefully some interaction.

---

<sup>36</sup> Robin Palmer, 'Admirable Advocacy in Aceh', Mokoro Newsletter 47, June 2008.

Later I said that in the highly unlikely event that I were ever invited to appear on *Desert Island Discs*, I would have no hesitation in choosing 3 songs which made a particular impact on me and which reflect the fact that so much of my adult life has been tied up, in various ways, with the long struggle for the liberation of Southern Africa.

1. *Nkosi Sikelele Afrika* (God Bless Africa), a hymn written back in the 19<sup>th</sup> century by a black South African priest, and adopted as the song of freedom by the African National Congress.
2. *A Luta Continua* (The Struggle Continues) sung by the great South African singer Miriam Makeba.<sup>37</sup>
3. *Grandola, Via Morena* sung by Zeca Afonso, played in the early morning of 25 April 1974, when young army officers, tired of fighting losing colonial wars in Mozambique and Angola, rose up to overthrow the fascist dictatorship which had been in place in Portugal since 1926.

Hard to imagine playing these songs on retirement if I'd been a lifetime academic!

---

<sup>37</sup> I found it curious, and a little sad, that the phrase meant nothing to almost all the young Zimbabwean researchers I worked with from 2003.

## 4. THE CONSULTANCY WORLD

### a. Introduction

I have spent a great deal of my working life in the academic and NGO worlds, very little in the consultancy world. That is because I found myself for the most part gainfully employed in full-time jobs that I really enjoyed and so had no incentive to look elsewhere. But I have had a long-standing involvement with Mokoro, an Oxford-based consultancy group, through Martin Adams, and recognize that for many people consultancy is a preferred option. I thought it worthwhile asking some of my Mokoro colleagues the question, 'why be a consultant?'. I got some very interesting and detailed responses, which I don't have the space to do full justice to here.

Martin Adams never set out to be a consultant, but found himself stuck in an office job and so decided to go freelance 'in places where I wanted to be and with people I liked.' For him, this is the most rewarding part of being a consultant. For Liz Daley, 'consultancy enables you to be your own boss and work flexibly and independently. This is a great asset if you have other responsibilities that you are very committed to – like being a parent in my case. It gives you variety of assignments and clients, which is good for intellectual stimulation. But, the big downside, it can be very isolating. And there is constant uncertainty financially, worrying about where the next piece of work will come from.' Catherine Dom likes the flexibility and independence that the consultancy life offers and has been fortunate to have developed long-term relationships with a number of countries and people in them. For Chris Tanner, initially 'consultancy allowed me to get a vast depth of experience in several places far more quickly than a 'proper job' would have done. The strong point of being a consultant is on the technical side for sure.' Now returning to consultancy after a long stint with FAO in Mozambique, it 'allows me to use my experience and to work in a way that is flexible and still keep my feet under the table in Wales.' Stephen Turner drifted into consultancy, finds it 'stimulating and stressful, perhaps especially for a generalist like me', but also depressing because you can work hard on a project and yet get zero feedback.

I have been a consultant both during my time with Oxfam (partly as a way of helping to cover my salary) and with Mokoro since being retired from Oxfam in 2007. The former included work on land reform in Zimbabwe, South Africa and Rwanda; the latter a *Literature Review of Governance and Secure Access to Land* for DFID, a scoping exercise on land rights advocacy for Oxfam International in Cambodia and *A History and Celebration of Oxfam's Land Rights Advocacy Work in post-Tsunami Aceh, Indonesia, 2005-7*. Virtually all of these consultancies were great learning opportunities, at many levels.

In the latter 3, on governance I 'warned' DFID that:

land issues are profoundly political in nature and any outsiders who enter this terrain need to do so with eyes wide open and with a good knowledge of the particular context in which they seek to intervene, including the historical context. This is critical for anyone, but especially so for representatives of a former colonial power. Zimbabwe is the most obvious and tragic case of where 'history matters' and where many mistakes were made on all sides because of a failure to recognise this and to adopt long-term horizons.

Another theme which recurs through the literature on land and secure tenure is that we are talking about complex, evolving processes which require sensitive understanding and

responses which adopt a long-term perspective. But that is a very difficult thing to ask of local politicians, of land administrators, of civil society organisations - and also of donors. Politicians are notorious for focusing on the short-term, while most institutions seem prone to regular restructurings which mitigate against both institutional learning and the kind of sustained approaches which are ideally desirable in the sensitive arena of land.<sup>38</sup>

I went to Cambodia when I did because the money had to be spent by the end of the financial year. It would have made greater sense to go 6 months later when the new OI Land Working Group had had more time to work together. I told Oxfam that it was a complete nonsense to ask an external consultant, with extremely limited exposure to Cambodia, to write an advocacy strategy for the OI team; this clearly had to come from them. I said that I had been very struck by the absence, in contrast to other parts of the world, of any serious discussion of women's land rights in either the literature or the discourse. Oxfam Cambodia staff confirmed that this was the case.

And the conclusion I drew from Aceh, in my 'farewell letter' to Oxfam colleagues in 2007 was that in the future 'I'll keep banging the drum about the need to look at land and property issues in all post-disaster situations; Oxfam's very effective work in post-Tsunami Aceh and in post-earthquake Pakistan has shown how critically important this can be.'

Now to 3 consultancies during my Oxfam career.

#### **b. Zimbabwe 1999**

This took place some months after the famous December 1998 donors' conference, when DFID recruited Martin Adams (then working for the Department of Land Affairs in South Africa), John Cusworth (University of Bradford) and myself to advise them what to do next. We said unequivocally – buy some land for redistribution. The logic of this was the palpable frustration and widespread impatience at the slow pace of the official land resettlement programme and the obvious threat of unconstitutional action, coupled with the fact that the British Government was legally able to buy land and that the other serious donors were waiting to take their lead from the British. We argued that though buying land would undoubtedly be politically difficult, not to do so would inevitably lead to a deteriorating situation on the land in Zimbabwe. I think that our advice was favourably received by DFID in Harare – I had a sense that they wanted outsiders to make such a case – but it was clearly deemed too politically risky by the Foreign Office in London. I asked Clare Short about this once, but she had no recollection of our report! Hardly surprising since the New Labour government was 'particularly resistant to any critical perspective derived from the past' and, incredibly, even failed to consult Lord Carrington about what had been agreed, or not, at Lancaster House.<sup>39</sup> In February 2000, Mugabe lost a referendum vote, the farm invasions began and our fears were sadly confirmed.

---

<sup>38</sup> <http://www.gsdrc.org/docs/open/HD417.pdf>

<sup>39</sup> Blessing-Miles Tendi, 'The Origins and Functions of Demonisation Discourses in Britain-Zimbabwe Relations (2000-)', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, **40**, 2014.

### **c. South Africa 2000 – DLA**

DFID asked Lionel Cliffe and me to join a South African team reviewing donor support to the land reform programme. We both jumped at the invitation and an absolutely fascinating month it was, being able to take a close look at a country I previously knew only at second hand. The politics were bizarre. Between the time we were appointed and when we started work, Derek Hanekom, the Minister of Lands and Agriculture and a dedicated supporter of land reform, had lost his job following recent elections and been replaced by the former Deputy Minister of Agriculture, Thoko Msani-Didiza. She had frequently clashed with Hanekom in the past, was said to be close to 'organised agriculture' (a wonderful South African phrase) and to be, at best, sceptical about land reform. So all past policies seemed to be on hold and there was considerable disarray and tension within the Department of Land Affairs (DLA). It was clear that the rather complex land reform programme was in great difficulties. We were asked to advise how best DFID might continue to support land reform in South Africa, which was not easy because of the turmoil and strong racial tensions within DLA. This put us in a particularly delicate problem because we were appointed by (and generally sympathetic to) the old, more radical, regime and so regarded with some suspicion by supporters of the new. There was certainly plenty to rubbish on land reform generally and DLA's performance in particular – all beneficiaries we met had never seen the same official twice – and the people they did see were all consultants! But there were equally plenty of vested interests only too happy to see land reform rubbished – so Lionel and I kept stressing that land reform takes time, the need to take a longer term perspective, and it being too early to judge success or failure. The team divided in order to maximise coverage, and I got to see a lot of rural Kwa-Zulu Natal and the Northern Cape, which was fascinating. The small towns seemed far less unreconstructed than post-war Mozambique a decade earlier. I also got to see the very severe limits of government's power and capacity to deliver land reform,<sup>40</sup> or anything else.

It was clear that in most places the old power relations on the land were little disturbed; the old National Party still controlled the Western Cape and (until recently) the Northern Cape, where progress on land reform and housing was said to have swung votes to the ANC. Getting farmworkers to meetings to explain their rights was difficult. The Broederbond was still controlling who got contracts in the small towns of the Western Cape, and no doubt elsewhere. 'Organised' farmers in the Northern Cape were seeking 'joint equity schemes' with black farmers to acquire cash and water rights along the Orange River. DLA was outsourcing virtually everything, including project management, to predominantly white consultants, all with mobile phones (my first serious encounter with them!). The old land advocacy NGOs were mostly in sad decline, had clearly leaked key staff to government and found it hard to adjust to the new environment. Every land reform project appeared *sui generis*. There were clearly fundamental problems with the so-called 'demand led' approach to land reform in a context where local 'communities' (itself a hugely problematic concept) found it very difficult to organise to purchase land. A very strange business.

---

<sup>40</sup> For a very recent damning indictment of land reform in South Africa see Adries du Toit, 'Op-Ed: Land reform – cloud cuckoo land or calculus of power?', *Daily Maverick*, 20 August 2014 [http://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2014-08-11-op-ed-land-reform-cloud-cuckoo-land-or-calculus-of-power/#.U\\_R-uKtwZrR](http://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2014-08-11-op-ed-land-reform-cloud-cuckoo-land-or-calculus-of-power/#.U_R-uKtwZrR)

### **South Africa 2001 – the LRC**

In 2001 I spent time working with the South African Legal Resources Centre (LRC), undertaking a review of its land reform work. The LRC was established in 1979 as a non-profit public interest law centre ‘which uses law as an instrument of justice by providing legal services for the vulnerable and marginalized who suffer discrimination by reason of race, class, gender, disability or because of social, economic and historical circumstances.’ It drew its inspiration from the American civil rights movement of the 1960s, and established a strong record as a defender of the poor against the palpably unjust apartheid laws. Some of its members had recently played a key role in creating the new, and widely respected, South African Constitution.

As I wrote in my review, this was a fascinating voyage of discovery for me, and an invaluable insight into attempts to use the law as a means of achieving economic and social rights. It began with a workshop on Robben Island in February – where better to contemplate the role of the rule of law? – and involved meeting some hugely impressive people who saw the continuing urgency to litigate to assert and defend rights, to spread awareness of people’s rights, and to challenge the government to fulfil its Constitutional obligations. I also interviewed a few key people in the UK including my old academic colleague Martin Chanock, then Professor of Public Law, La Trobe University, Melbourne, who had written extensively about customary law in Africa and just published *The Making of South African Legal Culture 1902-1936: Fear, Favour and Prejudice* (Cambridge, CUP, 2001). I also interviewed Joel Joffe, Chair of Oxfam (1995-2001) and one of the defence lawyers for Nelson Mandela in the Rivonia trial in 1963-4, and Edward Lahiff, formerly of Nkuzi Development Association in the Northern Province, who had worked with the LRC on issues concerning farmworkers.

On being approached about this work by Henk Smith of the LRC’s Cape Town office, I told him that I didn’t know very much about law or about South Africa. This did not deter Henk. We want someone with experience of land reform outside South Africa, and ‘we want someone to hold a mirror up to us’ was the gist of his response. So I agreed. My motives were a combination of wanting to know more about a subject which impinged on my work as a Land Policy Adviser, working mostly in Eastern and Southern Africa, and about what lessons might be drawn for relevance in countries outside South Africa. In simple terms, a number of the NGOs I had worked with had said how difficult it was to find good lawyers you could trust at affordable rates to defend people whose land was threatened.<sup>41</sup>

One obvious conclusion from all this is how varied can be the circumstances and trying to guess what ‘the client’ actually wants from the consultant can sometimes be extremely difficult. I have enjoyed both going solo and working with Martin and with Lionel. But I am glad that my consultancies were rare events rather than a way of life.

---

<sup>41</sup> *Lawyers and Land Reform in South Africa: A Review of the Land, Housing & Development Work of the Legal Resources Centre (LRC)*, September 2001  
[http://www.mokoro.co.uk/files/13/file/palmer\\_evaluation\\_lrc.pdf](http://www.mokoro.co.uk/files/13/file/palmer_evaluation_lrc.pdf)

## 5. AN ACADEMIC AGAIN IN RETIREMENT?, 2007-

I wasn't quite sure what to expect in retirement. To the great amusement of Kaori Izumi, my partner Lisi Kunzemann acquired an allotment on my behalf and told me to go and work on the land instead of doling out advice about land! This has been a hard struggle, clearing the bush each year, and a very useful reminder of the real struggles of real farmers.

I was immediately involved in a consultation on land and governance for DFID (see section 4). I carried on supporting Prosper Matondi's team of young researchers in Zimbabwe and editing the book that would become *A House in Zambia, Recollections of the ANC and Oxfam at 250 Zambezi Road, Lusaka, 1967-97* (Lusaka, Bookworld Publishers, 2008). It gave me very great pleasure that President Kenneth Kaunda agreed to officially launch that book in Lusaka.<sup>42</sup> I went to Aceh for a month to research the history of Oxfam's land advocacy work there. And then came the financial crisis of late 2007 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, 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 my final effort, dated 31 July 2013.<sup>43</sup> This contained (1) reports, (2) books, journal articles and TV, video and radio clips, and (3) press cuttings. The total amounted to 248 pages! I prefaced them all 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.<sup>44</sup> So this will definitely be my last round of bibliographies.

---

<sup>42</sup> Robin Palmer, 'Launching in Lusaka', *Mokoro Newsletter* **50**, July 2009.

<sup>43</sup> Available at <http://www.mokoro.co.uk/other-resources/africa-general>

<sup>44</sup> As expressed in my Royal African Society blog, 'Land Grabbing in Africa II', 20 January 2011 <http://africanarguments.org/2011/01/land-grabbing-in-africa-ii>

It seems that as a result of this process I acquired the status of a global land grab expert! I was sent manuscripts and books to review, notably by Lorenzo Cotula of IIED, Fred Pearce, GRAIN, Ian Scoones et al and Mayke Kaag and Annelies Zoomers, and I gave a number of TV, radio and press interviews including one in VoxAfrica's *Shoot the Messenger* programme on *Who owns land in Africa?*

Then, in October 2009, I went to hear Albie Sachs give the Bram Fischer Memorial Lecture at New College, Oxford. I happened to sit next to William Beinart, with whom I had worked 30 years earlier at Queen Elizabeth House. He is now the Rhodes Professor of Race Relations (a curious title, I've always felt) at Oxford University in succession to Terry Ranger. William asked me whether I would be interested in putting together some panels on land at the biennial conference of the African Studies Association of the UK (ASAUK), of which he was then President, to be held in Oxford in September the following year.

I did a bit of reading of what this might involve (I greatly underestimated the admin work!), started asking around, stressing that I had no resources to get people to Oxford, yet received some very positive feedback, and so decided to go ahead. I thought that, inter alia, it would provide an opportunity to showcase the work of some of the young Zimbabwean researchers with whom I had worked, as well as those working with Ian Scoones,<sup>45</sup> to have papers on women's land rights and the global land grab, and to give Lionel an opportunity to talk about his important ongoing historical research on land reform in Kenya, Zimbabwe and South Africa.

And so it proved. There were some late withdrawals (sadly including Patrick McAuslan and Patience Mutopo), outrageously Prosper Matondi was denied a visa (though his paper was presented by his colleague Chris Sukume), but we all felt that our section of the conference went really well. We ran 6 panels – on women's land rights, land grabbing, historical reflections on land reform, land in post-conflict situations, and 2 on Fast Track land reform in Zimbabwe. The sessions were all well attended, and it certainly helped having a common stream, meeting in the same room, and attracting many of the same people to each of the sessions. This in the midst of a huge event in which more than 300 papers and presentations were given. I had managed to attract an impressive line-up of speakers: Lionel Cliffe, Cherryl Walker, Bill Kinsey, Miles Tendi, Sara Pantuliano, Samir Elhawary, Amanda Hammar, Ian Scoones, Chris Sukumre, B.Z. Mavedzenge, Birgit Englert, Liz Daley, Sibongile Ndashe, Fiona Flintan and Ruth Hall.

But before that I had to write a proper academic paper myself, which I'd not done for many years. One of the freedoms of my NGO life was being able to write pretty much anything I fancied and of any length – and post a good many of them on the land rights website which I managed! I already had a short title – 'Would Cecil Rhodes have signed a code of conduct?' This had just popped into my head while attending a presentation in the House of Commons by FAO's Paul Munro-Faure on its soon to be famous Voluntary Guidelines. I had previously written a short rant, *A new Scramble for Africa?* for the non peer-reviewed *Mokoro Newsletter* **52** (May

---

<sup>45</sup> Since January 2008 I had worked as an adviser to the *Livelihoods after Land Reform: the poverty impacts of land redistribution in Southern Africa* project in Zimbabwe, South Africa and Namibia. Until I visited Namibia in May 2008 I had always believed that Matabeleland was rather dry!



2010), re-published by GRAIN.<sup>46</sup> I was struck by the strong similarities between what I had written about in colonial Zimbabwe and what was now going on – land grabbing by companies, a culture of silence, deals being struck behind closed doors, a huge amount of legal impunity, and local farmers waking up one day to find that their land had been given away, often to foreigners. So I expanded my rant in the way I still remembered – by stuffing it full of footnotes – and by citing a number of ridiculous statements from African politicians saying that there were millions of hectares of ‘spare’ or ‘vacant’ land which they were happy to give away for a pittance to anyone. Writing ‘Would Cecil Rhodes?’ was a very interesting experience. It led me to read again what my former academic colleagues Leroy Vail and Landeg White had written about concession companies in colonial Mozambique. Both there and in Zimbabwe the parallels with the present were quite striking.

I have grown more and more appalled at the way in which many African political leaders look down upon, nay despise, small-scale farmers and pastoralists, who are derided as ignorant, backward and stupid. Agriculture needs investment, they argue. Of course it does, but does anyone remember structural adjustment programmes which forbade it? The answer is clear – bring in foreigners, who know how to farm properly and who will do so on a large scale. Oh my *Roots of Rural Poverty* of long ago. Or, as Lionel asked at the 2010 ASUK conference, ‘does anyone remember the Tanganyika Groundnut Scheme?’ In his historical reflections at that conference Lionel noted that only in South Africa were existing farms transferred intact; elsewhere they were sub-divided. This implicitly meant there would be group farming, a weird notion in a market economy. Now that most of these enterprises have collapsed, what should be put in their place? The South African state has become a major landlord, leasing land to ‘beneficiaries’, while lots of ‘land reform land’ has ‘leaked’ back to white farmers in various ways. Lionel also made the interesting points that nothing in the now 50-year old Kenyan land reform programme had worked out in the way that it was supposed to, and that there had been very little lesson learning from earlier Kenyan experiences in either Zimbabwe or South Africa.

My curious re-engagement with the academic world was to continue. Shortly after the ASUK conference, the Land Deal Politics Initiative (LDPI), established in January 2010 by a group of 5 academics (including Ian Scoones and Ruth Hall) to undertake ‘engaged research’ on the land grabbing phenomenon,<sup>47</sup> announced plans to hold a big conference at IDS, Sussex (Ian’s base) in April 2011. The response to this initiative was overwhelming. Amazingly, over 400 people wanted to write papers for the event, but there was space for only 120. The organizers were clearly surprised by this reaction, but used it to create a really exciting programme. 70 countries were featured in the 120 papers. I was invited to present, once again, my ‘Would Cecil Rhodes?’ paper.<sup>48</sup>

---

<sup>46</sup> <http://farmlandgrab.org/13310>

<sup>47</sup> It began with a small grant competition (maximum \$2,000 per study) for 40 young researchers, which proved highly successful [www.iss.nl/ldpi](http://www.iss.nl/ldpi)

<sup>48</sup> ‘Would Cecil Rhodes have signed a Code of Conduct? Reflections on Global Land Grabbing and Land Rights in Africa, Past and Present’, [http://www.future-agricultures.org/papers-and-presentations/doc\\_download/1137-would-cecil-rhodes-have-signed-a-code-of-conduct-reflections-on-global-land-grabbing-and-land](http://www.future-agricultures.org/papers-and-presentations/doc_download/1137-would-cecil-rhodes-have-signed-a-code-of-conduct-reflections-on-global-land-grabbing-and-land)

You can generally gauge how a conference is going by the hubbub level in the coffee breaks. It remained constantly high throughout the 3 days. Quite deliberately, an extremely varied audience had been assembled (as Kaori Izumi and I had done in Pretoria in 2003). Women and men came from all continents and from many walks of life; including peasant and farmers' associations, activists (Via Campesina, FIAN etc), 29 research institutions and 69 universities, some NGO folk, over 20 PhD students who had won LDPI small grants (an important and imaginative inclusion), plus some of the usual suspects from the World Bank, USAID, FAO, DFID, and Dutch and German government agencies. As Jun Borras (the prime moving force behind the LDPI) put it, this was to be an academic conference, but not one detached from the real world!<sup>49</sup>

Having gender on the agenda was really important, since it is scandalously absent from the vast majority of the literature on land grabbing. I told the conference that by far the best study to date was Liz Daley's recent report commissioned by the International Land Coalition.<sup>50</sup>

In the final session of what most of us agreed had been a hugely energising event, Jun Borras concluded that researchers need to be able to intervene more nimbly and quickly, to go beyond a reactive agenda and be more strategic, to identify alternatives, mobilise broader alliances, sustain the dialogue and not be afraid of tensions, which can be productive. We should even think about ways of grabbing land back. In the next phase there would be more small research grants for young scholars and another conference, at Cornell University in New York in October 2012. I was not able to attend this, but some of those who did attend said that it was also extremely successful.<sup>51</sup> Hopefully, like the struggle, the LDPI will continue. The global land grab has certainly succeeded in building closer links between the academic and NGO worlds.

Finally, in March last year I had the honour of being invited to speak at the launch in Oxford of Terry Ranger's latest book, *Writing Revolt. An Engagement with African Nationalism, 1957-67* (Woodbridge, James Currey, 2013). I paid tribute to his inspirational teaching at UCRN. I acknowledged that 'I owe absolutely everything to the education I received, both on and off the campus, in colonial Zimbabwe.' I went on to say that 'I've always stressed to young Zimbabwean scholars my huge debt to the university in Harare and stressed to myself the desire to try to pay something back for the wonderful and privileged education that I received there half a century ago.'

---

<sup>49</sup> For more details, see my 'Land Grabbing in Brighton', *Mokoro Newsletter* **56**, May 2011  
<http://www.mokoro.co.uk/newsletters/1>

<sup>50</sup> Elizabeth Daley, *Gendered impacts of commercial pressures on land*, International Land Coalition, January 2011  
[http://www.landcoalition.org/sites/default/files/publication/902/MOKORO\\_Gender\\_web\\_11.03.11.pdf](http://www.landcoalition.org/sites/default/files/publication/902/MOKORO_Gender_web_11.03.11.pdf)

<sup>51</sup> <http://www.cornell-landproject.org/activities/2012-land-grabbing-conference/>

## 6. CONCLUSION

I have had a very strange and interestingly mixed 'career'.

I won a scholarship to study at the University College of Rhodesia and Nyasaland in 1960 because an unknown person failed his or her A levels.

I stumbled into the academic world because my professor, Eric Stokes, asked me to do some work for him one long vacation and then suggested that I might go for a PhD.

I stumbled out of the academic world because I couldn't find a job in the UK or Australia and didn't want to find a job in apartheid South Africa.

I stumbled into the NGO world while training to become a school teacher.

I stumbled into the consultancy world first because Oxfam couldn't pay my salary and then returned to it a little on retirement.

In retirement, I re-engaged a little with the academic world as a result of the global land grab.

None of it was planned; it just happened.

I'm so very glad that it did.

And I very much hope that Lionel enjoyed his equally 'mixed' career as much as I have done.