



# Mali: whose land is it anyway?

Foreign firms are snapping up all the best fertile land in Mali. But what does this mean for the local farmers?



**Madeleine Bunting**  
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Women harvest rice in Mali, where 80% of the population depend on farming for their livelihood. Photograph: Guido Cozzi/Atlantide Phototravel/Corbis

A new complex of government offices on the banks of the river Niger in Bamako, Mali, is like a wedding cake; pale pink, frosted with decorative detail, its plate glass winking in the sun. It's called the Administrative City and it was financed by the Libyan-backed Malibya development company. It is a powerful symbol of North African oil money and what it has to offer one of the poorest countries in the world.

Several hundred kilometres downstream there is more evidence of the petromillions pouring into Mali. In the dusty flat marshlands of Macina in the Ségou region, enormous green metal sluice gates tower over a massive new canal built by Malibya. Forty kilometres long and 30 metres wide, it is one of the biggest canals in sub-Saharan Africa.

The Chinese contractors have just finished building it and it is eerily quiet, with only the slap of water against the new concrete walls and the chatter of occasional groups of schoolchildren heading home. The canal is destined to irrigate a vast area of land - 100,000 hectares in total - in one of the most controversial and secretive land deals in Africa, a continent that has become a target for a greedy and hungry world.

In the last six years, there has been a dramatic increase in foreign investment in land deals across Africa and the Malibya deal - a 50-year lease agreed by the Malian and Libyan presidents - has become totemic of the fear that this new phenomon of land grabbing will deprive subsistence farmers of their land and their

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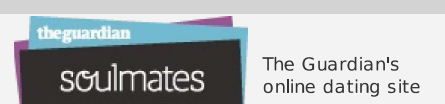
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Mali is one of the countries most affected by the scramble for land, and Ségou, the country's rice basket, is at the eye of the storm, with buyers from Senegal, South Africa, China, as well as domestic companies snapping up leases on thousands of hectares. This is land already intensively used in a country with one of the highest population growth rates in the world and where 80% of the people depend on [farming](#) for their livelihood.

As you stand by the sluice gates with the chalky brown water churning below, or you drive for the best part of an hour on the new road running alongside the vast canal, you get a sense of the dramatic scale and huge cost – estimated at \$54.7m (£34.6m) – of the project.

Big ambitions are about to be unleashed on this land of small, mud walled villages, rice fields and grazing herds of cattle. Some villagers are hopeful that the new scheme will bring much needed irrigation and jobs to these desperately poor communities. Malibya has promoted its scheme as part of a bid to raise agricultural yields and improve food security in a country where many often go hungry.

"I'm not reassured by the promises," says Abdullai Kee, a member of the local farmers' union. "They tell the villagers that they will give compensation for land and that they will give jobs, but this is just to give villagers a feeling of having been 'consulted'." He has seen the maps of how the land will be parcelled out for mechanised rice production and fears that the dispossessed will have no choice but to work as day labourers.

No one knows if there has been an environmental impact assessment or what attempt has been made to map how many people are living on this land. Already, the canal has blocked several important cattle routes. What adds to the sense of insecurity is that Mali has almost no private land titles and land is owned ultimately by the state. Traditionally, this has been interpreted with respect for customary land use – both for grazing and agriculture. But it is far from clear that the rights of those currently living on the land will be protected. Already, more than 150 families have been forced off the land to make way for the canal, and campaigners worry that this is only the start.

"The government are bandits. What they are doing is completely against every law," says Ibrahim Coulibaly, president of the Coordination Nationale des Organisations Paysannes, which has been organising protests. "Even if the land does belong to the government, the people living on it still have rights, and we will do everything to fight against this injustice."

The danger is that it will exacerbate food insecurity in a country where malnutrition is widespread and food production is already seriously threatened by climate change, argues Mark Butler, the country representative for the UK aid agency Tearfund.

Georgette Foure saw her house and garden flattened to make way for the canal. She was paid just £511 for her house and fields. A widow and mother of six children, her eyes well up as she tells her story.

"I used to get a good harvest from my big garden and it helped me feed my family and pay for the children's education. Now we have nowhere to live. How would you feel if someone came early one morning and destroyed everything? It was unbelievable. They gave us some compensation but it was not enough and the land they gave us is a big hole in the ground which we will have to fill before it can even be used to grow anything."

She smooths down her dress; ironically, it is made of fabric celebrating Mali's recent 50th anniversary and emblazoned with the slogan "The Fiftieth is for You".

"It is hard to look ahead because my family depended on me. Now I work a little on other people's farms and doing odd jobs to survive. It's a nightmare and the only thing which gives me strength is to rely on God."



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villagers offer stories of inadequate compensation. The tumbled-down mud walls of their demolished homes are still evident beside the new canal.

Tienty Tangaka stands on the baked earth and rubble where his home and garden once stood. Beside him is the massive stump of a neem tree that was cut down to make way for the heavy equipment needed for construction.

"The compensation they gave was not enough to build a new house," he says, his clothes ragged. "We are very deeply shocked. I have lived here all my life but I was told my smallholding was not on the map used by Malibya to build the canal. They took me to the tribunal and I was told that I had built on land where building was not allowed – and I lost my home.

"This project is good for the government but it is not good for the people. Even before it has become operational we are seeing the drawbacks; once the gates opened on the canal we saw all the water pour in, we knew there would be less water for others.

"We had meetings with Malibya but the compensation they have offered is too little for our families. We have no words to describe this betrayal. I'm not worried about myself – I'm 51 and in another 10 years I will be done. But my little children, I don't know what will be their future. I don't know how they will survive."

Standing in the ruins of Tangaka's old home, two brand new phone masts are visible on the other side of the canal. There are also plans for an airstrip, which is fuelling suspicions that the rice produced is not destined for Mali but for export to [Libya](#) to meet the need for cheap food for its large migrant workforce. Like many Middle-Eastern countries, oil-rich Libya imports large quantities of food and it needs to ensure cheap and plentiful supplies.

A little further on, just beyond Kolongo, in the village of Bourant, the David and Goliath conflict between these villagers and Malibya came to a head a few months ago. During his nightshift, one construction worker noticed that the bulldozer was turning up human corpses. Without adequate maps, the construction team had stumbled into two adjacent cemeteries, one for Muslims and one for Christians. Uproar ensued with nearby villagers grabbing farm tools to form a blockade against the bulldozers. Work stopped for several weeks.

Diarra Seynei takes us to the area beside the canal. "Considering the culture and traditions of Mali, this is a big shame, an insult to our values. This was the resting place of our parents," he says.

We walk on the bare earth along the dyke in the baking heat, listening to his story of outrage. We stumble on a fragment of human skull.

"They could have avoided the graveyard but they wanted to do the job quickly and they wanted the straight route. Many people cried when the bodies were taken from the graves. It was a big shock," he adds.

Worst of all, he says, there was no way to identify the broken bodies or to work out which bones were Muslim and which Christian for reburial in the new sites.

As we are talking, a large truck draws up. A Malibya manager approaches us, asking us what we are doing and tells us that the land is private property. Our guides talk vaguely of research and the manager is suspicious, insisting that we should have asked permission from his office. The atmosphere is tense, and we leave.

Local farmers risk losing their land and their livelihood, but perhaps the greatest risk of this project is the loss of water. Malibya has boasted that the new canal has the capacity for 11m cubic metres a day, 4bn cubic metres a year. Campaigners claim that is twice the capacity of any other canal in the region. Their concern is that neighbouring land will be deprived of water when stocks

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priority access to the water.

Water is everything in Mali: half the country is desert and the bulk of the population depends on the river Niger, which dominates the country's central belt and forms one of Africa's biggest inland swamps, an area crucial to Mali's rice production, fishing and nomadic cattleherding economy. Further downstream, another five countries depend on its waters before it finally empties into the Atlantic in Nigeria. The Malibya deal is making not just many Malians anxious, it is making its neighbours uneasy as well.



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