

Film of the Month: 'Land Rush' Exposes Conflicting Ideals of Development in Mali

Still from "Land Rush"

Mali was hit hard by the **global food crisis** of 2007–2008. After years of social and economic development, widespread drought and increased oil costs caused food prices to soar, leading to widespread food insecurity and poverty. It also exacerbated an issue the country was already struggling with: Land rights.

75% of Mali's population are farmers and rely heavily on **rain-fed agriculture** to make a living. In 2009, the Malian government reacted to the food crisis by selling 30 million hectares of the country's most fertile land to foreign investors.

Foreign Interests

Mima Nedelcovych is one of those investors – a 60 year old agri-business man from Louisiana intent on becoming a key figure in Mali's agricultural development. *Land Rush* showcases the polarisation caused by his 600 million dollar sugar cane project 'Sosumar', initiated in conjunction with the Government of Mali. While many Malians praise the project and its promise of prosperity, others staunchly reject it. Nedelcovych sees it as an employment opportunity for poor farmers working hectares of land with little yield, and a major step in the right direction for Mali's development.

“The beauty of this project is that it creates a whole series of independent farmers around us,” He says, *“as we develop we are actually creating a new class of commercial farmers that will grow over time.”* There's just one drawback to Mima's plan – it will clear thousands of hectares of land to create sugarcane

Colonial Legacy

Land ownership in pre-colonial Africa was largely vested in **lineages, clans and families**. In Mali, the concept of land ownership didn't formally exist in its current form until France **colonised** the country in the late 1800s. Between 1892 until 1960, the French seized millions of hectares of land, cleared it for industrial farming, dammed the Niger River and gave 80% of land ownership rights over to the state.

Land grievances have been a key source of social unrest on the African continent in the decades following independence from colonial rule, leading to civil war in South Africa, Liberia, Sierra Leon and Sudan. According to environmental historian Steven Stoll, poor farmers in Mali have been particularly implicated by the land ownership system imposed on them:

“Poor farmers do not own their land in Mali because they date from a time before there was land ownership. When you have people who belong to this different type of land regime, they are vulnerable to any force, state or company, that can pull everything out from under their feet.”

...perity to the country by driving employment up. He is backed by the state and by many villages that are enthusiastic about the project, believing in its potential to pull the country out of poverty. On the other hand, farmers like Koussama Diara actively oppose Sosumar – and for good reason.

“Even if a family owns only one hectare of land, that is their soul,” he says, “our ancestors and families farmed these fields, and we never asked for help or money. Even if they give us lots of money, it will run out.” For Diara and his community, land is much more than just a livelihood.

Ten years on from the film's release, a historic **new law** gives Malians critical rights to their land, but the ongoing conflict between north and south now makes development projects in Mali extremely challenging. *Land Rush* raises an important question: who owns Mali – the farmers, the state or foreign investors?

Land Rush | WHY POVERTY? | (Documentary)



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