

A portrait of Dr. Madiodio Niassé, a Black man with short hair and glasses, wearing a dark blue shirt and a grey sweater. He is looking slightly to the right of the camera with a neutral expression. The background is a blurred outdoor setting with trees and a bright sky, suggesting a natural environment.

**"Communities are
smart
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to make the right choices"**

Since the mid-1990s, the International Land Coalition (ILC) has been working to promote equitable and secure access to land for poor men and women in order to combat poverty and achieve food security. With more than 120 institutional members, the Coalition is committed to amplifying the voices of civil society organisations so that they can contribute to both the international debate on land and to national land processes. Born in Senegal, Dr Madiodio Niassé has been the Director of ILC since 2005.

Interview: Laura Eggens

Promoting access to land rights has become increasingly important: the growing global demand for land is increasing the risks of dispossession and the further marginalisation of the rural poor. As Madiodio Niassé explained, “the current food crisis is the result of food supplies not matching the demand, but to a large extent, it is also an issue of inequality of access to the available food and, more generally, to the wealth created. Thus, there is a need to create an environment that is conducive to more equity, particularly in terms of access to land.” Land issues have gained recognition in the past few years, due to awareness-raising efforts by many organisations such as ILC, but more so because of what is now known as the “global rush for land in the South”. According to the ILC Director, “the recent surge of large-scale land acquisitions, or ‘land grabbing’, has served as an eye-opener to the importance of land governance. The phenomenon of large-scale transnational land acquisitions is in fact not new. However, since 2007, we are seeing it on a scale that was unknown in recent decades.”

What exactly is happening? There are both pull and push factors. We need to look at both to understand the phenomenon we are witnessing today. Let us start with the pull factors. Why are poor countries opening their doors to foreign investors and giving away their land? In many poor regions of the world the agricultural sector is in crisis. In Africa, for example, it has been weakened by market liberalisation and reduced state intervention. Many developing countries also have poor governance. On the push side, there are many dimensions, but I would like to mention just one, which I see as a key driver of the global rush for farmlands. Highly populated countries in Asia face the loss of arable land (increasingly converted to other industrial, transport and commercial uses) and, more importantly, severe water scarcity. These countries are paying the price of a water-intensive Green Revolution, and their food demand is increasing dramatically, pushing them to look for farmlands abroad as an alternative to depending on an increasingly unpredictable international food market. This adds to the increase in food demand by traditional food-importing countries. In addition, the expansion of agro-fuels and the climate crisis are other important drivers of the phenomenon. This is the context of large-scale land acquisitions, in a simplified manner. One notable aspect is that, for the first time, small-scale farmers and herders are directly competing with powerful international investors for their land.

Should governments mediate between small farmers and large investors? I see different types of governments. Some genuinely want to develop the agricultural sector of their country, and believe that the scale of investment they need cannot be found at the national level. They are

aware of the levels of poverty and unemployment they have to address, and the riots and instability triggered by food price hikes have made this an urgent issue. I think that where governments genuinely want to develop their own agricultural sector, they need to be supported and advised. They need to be provided with adequate information about the various options for developing their agriculture sector, including (but not limited to) attracting foreign investments. They need to understand that there are alternative investment models that do not necessarily involve them giving away their land. It is essential that governments develop their own rural development strategies to serve their national priorities and the interests of their people. The role of foreign investment should be defined within the framework of such national strategies, which should firmly specify the conditions under which it will be acceptable.

And what to do in the case of weaker governments? In these cases you need investor responsibility. Sometimes investors care about their reputation, and have good intentions, aiming to comply with high standards in their business practices and their engagement in developed countries. But these companies are exceptions; for the most investors the opposite is true. Civil society organisations and governments have a role to play to ensure that private companies from their countries behave responsibly abroad.

If civil society mobilises, what should they focus on? One of the biggest problems in these large-scale land acquisitions is the lack of transparency. Many deals take place behind closed doors. For an investment transaction to

Farmers and their organisations need to be informed and included. Photo: ILC



be responsive to the needs of a country, it is at least essential that the terms under which it is being decided are known; that relevant parties are involved; and that relevant state organs and agencies play their roles openly. The second element is information sharing and evidence gathering. Information generation and sharing is crucial for an informed debate. Frequently, many of the heated debates about land grabbing are based on misunderstandings instead of a radical opposition on the substance of the problem. Often, protagonists simply do not speak the same language, or refer to the same evidence. In the search for appropriate responses, it is crucial to clarify the issues and to generate and share credible information. It is also important that civil society works directly with farmers, herders, and the owners and users of the land. It is very important to work towards securing land rights for the poor, especially for small farmers. This entails securing the commons; protecting the land that is used by pastoralists and indigenous people; ensuring that small farmers have enough land with secure tenure rights, and preventing governments from allocating their land for foreign investment. These are all important areas which civil society and farmers' organisations should focus on in the future.

The Land Matrix

Since 2009, the different organisations behind the Land Matrix have been systematically collating information on large-scale land acquisitions worldwide. The dataset covers transactions that entail a transfer of rights to use, control or own land through concession, lease or sale, which generally imply a conversion from land used by smallholders or for ecosystem services to large-scale commercial use. It aims to shed light on the six drivers that are contributing to a global rush for land: demand for food, fuel, timber, carbon sequestration, tourism and mineral exploitation. It now includes just over 2,000 deals from 2000-2010. These are cross-checked with data derived from systematic national inventories of land deals based on in-country research carried out by different institutions, alongside the increasing number of postgraduate and commissioned field-based research projects. According to Mr Niassé, "The diversity of our membership means we can show credible data, and this can be used to inform the debates and policy processes at global, regional and national levels."

What is the International Land Coalition doing?

Since its establishment 15 years ago, ILC has been focusing on raising awareness on the need for land reform and securing tenure rights, as well as supporting the advocacy efforts of our civil society members. A number of countries and regions have engaged in reform processes – formulation of land frameworks and laws – and ILC members, supported by the Secretariat, have often played an active role in this. We have supported multi-stakeholder consultations, or the formulation and implementation of laws and regulations in a number of countries. We will do this more systematically in the future.

We also invest a great deal in sharing information. Together with a number of partner organisations we are building a Land Portal, which we hope will become the leading source of information on land issues on the Internet over the next few years. Regarding large-scale land acquisitions, we are working on three levels. Firstly, we have helped a number of our members and partners to contribute information on what is happening, adding to the studies done elsewhere. The second area of work is the Land Matrix: we have recorded all the land deals reported in the press, and now have a database of more than 2,000 land deals (see box). Thirdly, we are supporting an open dialogue. This is because civil society, grassroots organisations, and in particular, farmers' organisations, and the owners and the users of the land, are not meaningfully involved in the current discussions, debates and policy processes related to the phenomenon of large-scale land acquisitions and their alternatives. We have started a series of civil society-centred dialogues, working with farmers' organisations in Africa, Asia, and Latin America with the aim of improving their understanding of what is happening. We hope that these dialogues will help them be better prepared to engage in the global debates that are currently taking place.

Is there anything that farmers can do themselves?

Yes, they can do many things. The reason why governments and others are looking for investments elsewhere is because they believe the level of investment in the agriculture sector is not enough. Governments, like many of us, often forget that the main investors should be the farmers themselves. The obstacles preventing farmers from investing in their land need to be better understood and then removed. Insecure land tenure is one of these constraints. Climate change and the uncertainty and vulnerability it entails is another. Governments could provide water control infrastructure to help minimise climate risks. If the appropriate conditions are created, farmers are more likely to invest in their land.



Working directly with farmers in an ILC joint research project in Fandriana, Madagascar, and in Mozambique (below). Photos: ILC

What do you think the future holds?

I think we are living in a very challenging period and that competition for land can be expected to intensify. China is no longer food self-sufficient and there are clear indications that it will increasingly rely on imports to fill its expanding food deficits. I think that in the coming years India is likely to lose its self-sufficiency and also resort to food imports. Because of the persistent energy crisis more and more land will be used to produce biofuels. Attempts to mitigate the climate crisis will continue to involve more investments in forests for carbon sequestration, sometimes at the expense of farmlands. While the global food demand will continue to grow dramatically, the amount of arable land will be shrinking. It will become more valuable and attract financial investors. In this context of intensified competition, poor countries will be under tremendous pressure to feed themselves, while their land will be targeted by domestic and foreign investors. Small-scale farmers will be at greater risk.

You worked before on water governance issues. What brought you to work for the International Land Coalition?

Although I moved from water to land (and previously from land to water), I remain in the area of natural resource governance. What I think I have learned from many years of engagement in water issues is that what really matters in the end is to ensure that society, when

confronted with difficult choices, engages in an open, inclusive and informed deliberation on the available options before making a choice. My conviction is that any choice made on the basis of a transparent and democratic societal deliberation is legitimate and should be respected, whether it is for or against large or small dams, for foreign or domestic investment, for small or large-scale farms. We should recognise that societies are sometimes confronted with difficult decisions. Take a recent case, which is grabbing the media headlines in my own country, Senegal. A company received 20,000 hectares in a region struggling with poverty, drought and a high level of outmigration. The deal had to be validated by the elected local rural council, which was split into two camps: a camp supporting the venture and another one rejecting it. The dispute turned into violent confrontation within the council, with many casualties. When the government decided to suspend the project, the opponents of the project rejoiced and the supporters of the investment (including hundreds of newly hired workers and their families) threatened to organise public demonstrations. The case is still pending as we talk. This example shows how complex and sensitive the situation can be. Decisions should not be taken lightly by any party. The complexity of the problem and the difficult decisions we face in responding to the challenges we are facing makes me modest. I think it is too simplistic to just say, “stop, ban the investment offers”, or “accept them all”. Each case is unique, and calls for unique responses that need to be made by societies through open, inclusive, informed and concerted processes. Communities are often smart enough to make the right choices. Our job is to promote information disclosure and more transparency in land transactions, generate and share evidence, amplify the voices of civil society and farmers’ organisations and support them in playing an active role in local and national land policy processes.

