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FORUM: THE RETURN OF LAND GRABBING
GRASSROOTS VOICES

Land and water grabs, militarized development and agrarian resistance in the Sahel

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ABSTRACT

The Sahel region of West Africa is experiencing a profound political reconfiguration marked by the rise of military governments amidst deepening ecological, economic, and social crises. In this context, the structural dispossession of rural communities - particularly through land and water grabbing - continues to intensify, often justified under the guise of development, counterterrorism, and national security. These processes have placed immense pressure on peasant and agrarian communities, whose livelihoods are intrinsically tied to access to and control over natural resources. Yet, this moment of rupture also opens contradictory spaces: while military regimes often restrict civic and political freedoms, they can also unsettle entrenched power structures and open cracks that movements might tactically exploit.

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In this Grassroots Voices' interview, Boaventura Monjane speaks with Massa Koné, a leading figure in the Malian Coalition Against Land Grabs (CMAT) and a key organizer within the West African node of the Global Convergence of Land and Water Struggles. Together, they explored the multiple and intersecting challenges confronting peasant movements in the region: the persistent and evolving forms of resource appropriation, the constraints imposed by militarized governance and anti-terrorist operations, and the ambivalent relationship between social movements and emerging authoritarian regimes. They also examined the strategic responses being developed from below—including grassroots legal resistance, advocacy for protective legislation, and the training of community paralegals (parajuristes)—which reflect a complex praxis of both confrontation and engagement. This conversation aimed not only to highlight the courage and creativity of rural struggles but also to interrogate the contradictions and dilemmas that confront movements seeking to defend collective rights in a context where political space is simultaneously narrowing and shifting.

Boaventura Monjane [BM]: Could you introduce yourself and explain your connection to the struggles over land, water, food, and agriculture in West Africa?

Massa Koné [MK]: My name is Massa Koné. I am the General Secretary of *l'Union des Associations et Coordinations d'Association pour le Développement et la Défense des*

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Droits des Démunis (UCADDDD – Union of Associations and Coordinating Bodies for the Development and Defense of the Rights of the Disadvantaged), a grassroots movement composed of community members engaged in the struggle for inclusive and democratic governance of natural resources, and against land grabbing. I also serve as the spokesperson for the Malian Convergence Against Land Grabbing (CMAT). CMAT is a coalition composed of five key organizations:

The first is **CAD-Mali**, a politically engaged organization that focuses on debt, development, and strong advocacy work. The second is the **CNOP** (National Coordination of Peasant Organizations of Mali), and the third is the **AOPP** (Professional Association of Peasant Organizations), which brings together numerous grassroots peasant and village organizations. **L'Union**, my own organization, is rooted in local communities and focused on resistance to forced evictions and the expropriation of natural resources. Finally, there is the **Ligue pour la Justice et les Droits de l'Homme (LGDH)**, a network of legal professionals committed to defending victims of human rights violations.

Together, these organizations form CMAT. I also act as the West Africa regional spokesperson for the **Global Convergence of Struggles for Land, Water, and Peasant Seeds**, a transnational network of grassroots movements and progressive NGOs active in 16 West African countries. We are united in the defense of land, water, and seeds as common goods that must remain under the stewardship of communities rather than being commodified for capitalist or imperialist exploitation.

My entry into these struggles was both personal and political. I was involved in activism since my student days, but I became deeply committed when my own community – and those I work with – were forcibly expelled from their lands. These experiences led to my imprisonment on several occasions, but they also reinforced my conviction that our struggles must go beyond individual cases. We began organizing across Mali and throughout Africa, with the understanding that resisting capitalist expansion requires collective, transnational responses. We fight not only for restitution, but also for the legal recognition of communities' rights to land, water, and seeds – rights that should be enshrined in national law and protected against the interests of the global market and imperial systems.

We also recognized that our struggle cannot remain isolated within Mali. Many others across Africa face similar challenges. Because our histories and cultures are deeply interconnected, we see the importance of regional unity. Our countries, arbitrarily divided during colonial negotiations such as the Yalta Conference, share a common destiny. No single country, no single movement, can succeed alone. This is why we are committed to building unity across borders. It is not about one individual or one organization taking the lead; it is about building collective power through horizontal solidarity among all movements.

The Convergence aims to bring together all struggles centered on the commons – land, water, and seeds – toward a strong and sovereign West Africa. This is the vision that drives our commitment.

BM: Could you speak about the creation of the West African convergence? Why do you believe it is a significant movement, both for the region and for Mali?

MK: The convergence was created in response to the structural power of both nation-states and regional institutions. Beyond the authority of our national governments, entities like **ECOWAS** (the Economic Community of West African States) wield significant

influence. Many key decisions, particularly those aligned with neoliberal and imperial agendas, are legitimized through ECOWAS under the guise of regional solidarity. If one government accepts a policy, it is often imposed across the region without meaningful consultation.

This realization motivated us to build a transnational network that could engage ECOWAS and other regional institutions in both advocacy and direct action. We recognized the urgent need to respond collectively to the multiple and interconnected threats facing our communities – not only land grabbing, but also the commodification of water and the erosion of peasant seed systems.

Intellectuals and grassroots actors alike understood that without control over land, water, and seeds, our communities could not sustain themselves. We saw how land was being integrated into the global market, how multinational corporations like Nestlé were commodifying water, and how peasant seeds were under threat from regimes of intellectual property and bio-piracy. In Africa, where roughly 75% of people depend on agriculture, pastoralism, and access to water, this was a profound threat to life itself. We realized we had to act together. During the African and West African Social Forum, we began a series of discussions, affirming that fragmentation was weakening us. It was no longer viable for some to focus solely on land, others on water, and still others on seeds. These are interconnected struggles, and they require a united front.

This reflection culminated in 2016 in Bamako, Mali, during a gathering in Nyéleni, where we officially founded the **West African Convergence of Struggles for Land, Water, and Peasant Seeds**. We adopted a collectively authored document – our 'Open Book' – which outlines our principles, objectives, and strategies. It contains three main parts: our vision, the demands we make, and the concrete recommendations we advocate for. This declaration serves as our compass.

Since then, the convergence has undertaken major advocacy efforts to defend community rights that are still not recognized in many post-colonial legal systems, which often prioritize privatization, market liberalism, and foreign investment. In contrast, we foreground socio-communitarian values and customary rights as essential frameworks for the governance of resources. These are the core reasons for the establishment of the convergence.

BM: How have land and water grabbing practices evolved in recent years in the region? Are we seeing new actors, new forms, or new justifications – such as the green economy, security narratives, or infrastructure projects?

MK: Yes, the dynamics of land and water grabbing in the region have become more complex and multifaceted. The actors involved are increasingly diverse and strategic, often adapting their discourse to the prevailing context. I sometimes describe them as chameleons – constantly shifting their appearance to fit the moment.

In earlier phases, land was grabbed in the name of food security or business investment. But these narratives were increasingly challenged and exposed. So now, the same actors are rebranding their projects under new banners – particularly **climate change**. This has become the dominant justification, especially through mechanisms like carbon credits and so-called 'green economy' initiatives. They claim to be capturing carbon or restoring degraded land, but in reality, it is often just another way to dispossess communities.

This trend represents a newer phase of accumulation by dispossession. These actors are now acquiring vast areas of land, supposedly for reforestation or the cultivation of 'more profitable' crops than traditional ones. But the real aim is control – over land, resources, and the carbon markets.

We are currently organizing to confront these trends head-on. In Guinea, for instance, we are working with local movements and preparing a regional conference. And in Belém, Brazil, at the upcoming UN Climate Conference, we intend to expose these false solutions and present the voices of communities resisting them.

The justifications keep changing. When there is drought, they invoke 'crisis' to justify land grabbing. When there is war, they use 'stabilization' as a pretext. But the outcome is the same: dispossession and exploitation. We are committed to unmasking these shifting strategies and defending the rights of communities to remain on their land, steward their water, and preserve their seeds.

Whenever there is a crisis – be it climate change, natural disasters, or other forms of collective misfortune – predatory actors seize the opportunity to further entrench land grabbing. These crises become pretexts for dispossession. This is one of the many strategies we have identified and analyzed over time.

Our response begins with organizing at the grassroots level. We prioritize political education and awareness-raising within communities to help them critically assess and reject false solutions presented under the guise of development or environmental protection. This includes recognizing and resisting narratives used to justify land grabbing.

BM: Are there signs of the militarization of land governance in the Sahel region? If so, how is it affecting rural communities?

MK: Yes, militarization is a growing reality in the Sahel. The region is deeply affected by armed conflict and the presence of extremist groups. In many cases, territories are controlled not by the state but by armed actors who extract resources such as minerals and timber to finance their operations. They militarize the land to exploit it for profit, which further entrenches violence and instability.

At the same time, state authorities have also increasingly adopted counterterrorism laws that are being used to criminalize activism. Those who resist mining operations or land grabs – activists, community leaders, and even legal advocates – are sometimes treated as security threats under anti-terror legislation. This has a chilling effect on organizing.

However, there's another side to this. Some military-led governments in the region have begun revisiting mining contracts signed by previous regimes and, in some cases, have even canceled exploitative agreements with multinational corporations. They claim to seek a more equitable redistribution of revenues from natural resource extraction and occasionally invite civil society to offer proposals on good governance.

So while the presence of military power brings repression and fear, there are also emerging contradictions. These regimes, not being under the same pressures as civilian politicians, sometimes take steps to assert more national control over resources. Nonetheless, the risk of authoritarianism remains high.

BM: In light of recent political transitions – such as military coups in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger – do you believe these regimes are more likely to support or repress rural demands for land justice?

MK: Both dynamics are at play. These governments can be supportive when it aligns with their interests, but they can also repress demands outright when they feel threatened. At the moment, some military authorities are attempting to present themselves as receptive to civil society and rural communities – especially because they rely on these communities for legitimacy and for cooperation in counterterrorism efforts.

For now, they're trying to appear inclusive. They invite us to dialogues and sometimes even override local officials who create friction with community organizations. But we are politically experienced and know that this phase is likely temporary. Once these regimes consolidate power, they may shift toward greater repression, particularly if communities challenge resource deals they have signed.

So yes, while they currently depend on community support to fight jihadism and maintain control, this reliance won't last forever. Once their interests are secured, we expect that many of the current openings will close. We must be cautious and prepare for this inevitability.

***BM:* Do you think the anti-imperialist and pan-Africanist rhetoric of these regimes translates into real support for land democratization or food sovereignty?**

MK: At present, their discourse does resonate with our demands for democratized land governance and food sovereignty. In Mali, for example, the regime has thus far respected our work. Even when local officials have attempted to obstruct our activities, higher authorities have intervened in our favor. They are allowing community organizations to operate freely and have expressed support for legislative reforms aligned with our vision.

For instance, the agricultural land law currently under discussion includes strong protections for peasant seed systems. We were invited to submit feedback, and our colleagues are actively working on these proposals. There is genuine dialogue for now.

But let me be clear: this pan-Africanist discourse didn't originate with the military. It comes from youth movements and social organizations. The military has adopted it to gain our support. Whether they act on it in the long term remains to be seen. So while I can speak positively about the present, I remain cautious about the future.

***BM:* How has the restriction of political space – such as the dissolution of political parties – affected your ability to organize in rural areas?**

MK: These political restrictions have had a real impact. Authorities have said that civil society will not be affected, but in practice, it's more complicated. Many of our allies at the local level – mayors and other elected officials – have been sidelined. These figures were important for facilitating our work, and now they are demoralized and much less active.

We're still allowed to hold public meetings, provided we clearly state their non-political nature. But the distinction between 'political' and 'apolitical' organizing is increasingly blurred. Some organizations that work with us are now viewed with suspicion, and their absence creates significant gaps in our networks.

Replacing their roles requires not only more human effort, but also more financial resources. Our work has become more demanding, especially in areas where political support once helped amplify our organizing. So yes, this political contraction has made things more difficult, even if it hasn't completely shut us down.

BM: How are communities currently resisting land and water grabs, especially given the emergence of new actors and strategies that you've described as 'chameleon-like'?

MK: While our overall strategies remain the same, we have adapted our methods – particularly in terms of community awareness and early detection of threats. One of our most effective tools has been the training of *parajuristes* – community-based paralegals who act as the first line of defense.

These parajuristes are deeply embedded in their communities. They are trained to recognize the early signs of land grabbing, to anticipate threats, and to raise alerts. For example, many land grabs begin with soft tactics – corrupting village chiefs or co-opting women's groups with money. This is a common practice among multinational corporations and even institutions like the World Bank.

Parajuristes monitor these dynamics and help us respond before it's too late. We are currently training parajuristes in Guinea, and we aim to expand this model across West Africa. It's a decentralized system of vigilance and resistance that makes our work more sustainable and locally rooted.

Of course, not all NGOs are aligned with our cause. Some environmental NGOs support these new land grabbing projects under the banner of climate mitigation. We must remain vigilant and continue to build alliances with organizations that genuinely support community rights.

BM: What are the main demands your movement is making to national governments and international institutions?

MK: Our principal demand is the legal recognition of communities' rights to land and water – enshrined in national constitutions and legislation. We need legal frameworks that guarantee community participation in the governance of natural resources.

Access to justice is also a major concern. Today, many rural communities must travel 100–200 kilometers to access a court. Justice must be decentralized and accessible.

At the international level, we demand binding regulations on multinational corporations. There must be robust accountability mechanisms for companies that profit from land and water grabs. We are also calling for a critical revision of **Article 6 of the Paris Agreement**, which currently allows carbon markets to be used as a cover for land dispossession. These loopholes must be closed.

BM: What does genuine agrarian, land, and water justice look like in West Africa?

MK: It begins with the recognition of communities' historical and legitimate rights to manage their own resources. Agrarian justice means legal frameworks that acknowledge the authority of local and Indigenous communities to steward their land, water, and

seeds. People have lived on and cultivated these lands for centuries – yet they remain excluded from decisions about their use. This exclusion is the heart of the injustice we are fighting.

BM: What types of alliances or solidarities are most needed today – regionally, continentally, and internationally – to advance food sovereignty and resist land dispossession?

MK: What we need most is the **convergence of struggles** – shared vision, unified action, and transnational solidarity. Alliances must be built not only among communities and peasant organizations but also among support structures: legal advocates, researchers, campaigners, and progressive NGOs.

Each partner, whether regional or international, must support convergence – support the organizations doing the political and educational work, and help amplify the demands of communities. We need to work together to dismantle false solutions and advance a collective agenda for justice.

BM: What gives you hope at this moment? Where do you see the greatest potential for change?

MK: What gives me hope is our ability to organize and build unity. Over the past 10–15 years, we have steadily come together across borders. That momentum is real.

Laws are beginning to change. In Mali and Guinea, we have managed to pass legislation that reflects the rights of communities. This gives us the courage to continue. It shows that we are on the right path. Of course, we must continuously reflect on our strategies and remain adaptable. Just as the actors of dispossession change their tactics, so too must we. That adaptability, and our growing unity, is what fuels our hope.

Author contributions

CRediT: **Massa Koné:** Writing – original draft; **Boaventura Monjane:** Writing – original draft.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributors

Massa Koné is a peasant lawyer in Mali, an expert in land law and community natural resource management. He is the Secretary-General of UACDDDD, spokesperson for the Malian Convergence Against Land Grabs (CMAT), and part of the West African node of the Global Convergence of Land, Water, and Peasant Seed Struggles (CGLTE- West Africa).

Boaventura Monjane holds a PhD in Sociology from the Faculty of Economics/Centre for Social Studies, University of Coimbra (Portugal). He is a Research Fellow at the Institute for Poverty, Land, and Agrarian Studies (PLAAS) at the University of the Western Cape and member of the Corpaccoout research team at National University of Political Studies and Public Administration. His research interests focus on agrarian movements, rural politics, food sovereignty, climate justice, and corporate accountability. Monjane also serves as co-editor for the Grassroots Voices section in the Journal of Peasant Studies and is the Solidarity Programme Officer for West Africa and Haiti at Grassroots International.