

GIM INTERNATIONAL INTERVIEWS DR ROBIN MCLAREN

Need for New Players and Leaders to Enter the Land Sector



Dr Robin McLaren is a widely known and recognised authority with more than 30 years of experience in the profession. Having developed GIS technology for a number of years, Robin set up his independent consulting company, Know Edge Ltd, in Edinburgh in 1986, providing GIS solutions for governmental and utilities clients across the United Kingdom. Following an introduction to international land administration and management during a UN-FAO mission to North Yemen in 1989, this became a major market for the company. 'GIM International' interviewed Robin to learn more about his involvement in many innovations and to hear his insightful opinions. Read on to learn why he believes there is a clear need for new players and leaders to enter the land sector.

(By Christiaan Lemmen and Rohan Bennett, contributing editors, GIM International)

You have been very much involved in the development of fit-for-purpose approaches in land administration. Why is such an approach needed?

It was a pleasure to co-author with Stig Enemark and Christiaan Lemmen (*one of the interviewers, Ed.*) to create the recently published *Fit for Purpose Land Administration Guiding Principles*, sponsored by the Global Land Tool Network. My motivation to be involved was threefold: first of all, to reduce the poverty I had witnessed in slums around the world – some two billion people are currently forced to live in such environments. Second, to define a methodology to solve the security of tenure gap that is participatory, quickly scalable, affordable, incrementally upgradable and flexible to accommodate different types of land tenure. And third, to promote a channel for adopting innovative, participatory approaches using mobile technology. And of course, the Sustainable Development Goals and the Global Agenda cannot be achieved without having good land governance in place, including the operational component of land administration systems. Fit-for-purpose land administration is the only show in town to deliver!

Your company is a so-called small to medium-sized enterprise (SME). What role do you foresee for SMEs in the fit-for-purpose world?

SMEs are the engines of many economies and the source of many innovations that are further commercialised. Within the context of fit-for-purpose land administration, there are key roles for SMEs to play. Think of developing country-specific fit-for-purpose land administration strategies, or formulating economic cost/benefit studies to justify the investments, assessing current capacity in the public and private sectors and developing capacity-development strategies. Or working with land professionals within a country to define their new, enhanced roles within the land administration regime and supporting the development of a network of trusted intermediaries, including training and independent monitoring and evaluation of fit-for-purpose programmes. SMEs add significant value through their independence and inject a combination of innovation and pragmatism.

We're now seeing layered dwelling developments in slum areas. Old derelict building blocks or incomplete towers are being occupied by squatters in some contexts. Is there a fit-for-purpose approach for dealing with this third dimension?

I understand the need to introduce the third dimension into cadastral systems, especially in high-value, urban areas. However, in 2011, when I introduced the concept of crowdsourcing land rights with a focus on innovative solutions for global insecurity of tenure issues, many of the top universities in our domain were focusing their research on Western cadastral systems and the third dimension. Fortunately, their research is now more balanced across the developed and developing worlds' land problems. Let's create security of tenure around communities at risk and then later solve the intricacies of the internal rights.

During the annual Land and Poverty Conference that was held recently in Washington, you launched together with Prof Stig Enemark a global campaign to eradicate insecurity of tenure. We've seen this type of campaign for diseases such as AIDS, but why now for tenure security?

We are all well aware of the high-profile and well-coordinated campaigns to eradicate infectious diseases. Some have been successful. Smallpox affecting humans was officially eradicated in 1980. Several global campaigns to eradicate AIDS, polio, guinea worm disease, yaws and malaria are under way. Although insecurity of tenure is not a disease, its impact is nevertheless devastating in terms of trapping people in poverty, displacing communities, reducing food security and creating hunger. So why not raise the profile of the insecurity of tenure 'disease' and initiate a global campaign that is high profile and maybe celebrity-led. Leonardo DiCaprio is a champion for climate change and even raised the issue in his Oscar acceptance speech. I strongly believe that land sector communities have a key role in collaborating to solve the 21st-century global problems and need to be encouraged to be more ambitious in their goals. They need to seek out new partners to support innovation, adopt highly scalable approaches, collaborate more effectively under this common objective to eradicate this scourge on the Earth – and create land rights for all. This proposed global campaign could well be the necessary catalyst for change to finally deliver this human right. If we don't, then others will quickly step into the vacuum.

It's a very ambitious campaign; you talk about achieving 80 percent global security of tenure by 2030. Earlier this year, you said in a column in GIM International that land professionals have been guilty of designing and implementing land administration solutions that are inappropriate and non-sustainable for developing countries. How do you envisage involving those professionals? Or are you looking to new partners and communities to achieve results?

Over the past 20 years I have been an active member of the International Federation of Surveyors (FIG) and my 'campaign' has been to take FIG members – land professionals, as I call them – out of their comfort zone and encourage them to start to adopt innovative approaches and technologies that can deliver more meaningful services to citizens at scale. This has included NSDIs (*national spatial data infrastructures, Ed.*), crowdsourcing of land rights and most recently fit-for-purpose land administration. However, the more traditional factions of the profession are trapped in the past, fighting radical change and defending their fiefdoms – I am perceived as the heretic!

The need for radical change is obvious if we look at our track record in attempting to reduce insecurity of tenure in developing countries. Governments, aid agencies, development banks and non-governmental organisations have made significant investments in the land sector. However, I would argue that they've not been successful in truly scaling up their solutions to make a major impact on implementing this human right in developing countries – with the exceptions being the fit-for-purpose approaches adopted in Rwanda and Ethiopia and now being initiated in Indonesia, for example. This lack of success has resulted from delivering inappropriate and unsustainable solutions and is compounded by broadcasting different and confusing messages to the recipients of aid from a very fragmented and diverse set of land sector communities – just look at the number of NGOs! I am not witnessing a ground swell of support across the land sector to rethink our approaches and to better coordinate our resources. I believe that a new set of partners – service providers and technology companies – is required to inject new innovation and energy into our sector to achieve the ambitious goals of this proposed global campaign. And of course we need to take the majority of the land professionals with us. There are great opportunities ahead.

So as-yet-unknown innovations and solutions may be needed – not only for the polygons representing spatial units, but also for the identification of people. How can it be done?

Before mentioning the advances in technology, I should emphasise that building sustainable land administration systems is not just a technical fix. New technical solutions will play a key role, but crucially this global campaign will only succeed if it's driven by adopting the fit-for-purpose land administration approach and generating strong political support. Enough evidence of innovative technical solutions is emerging, especially from Earth observation applications, to predict that they will be game changers to accelerate the capture of land rights and to achieve the campaign's objectives and time frame. Examples of emerging innovative technologies include DigitalGlobe's Tomnod platform, which is using artificial intelligence powered by crowdsourcing to automatically identify features of interest in satellite and aerial imagery. Meanwhile, Facebook recently used artificial intelligence software to scan about 15 billion satellite images to identify human-built structures, through automatic feature extraction, in 20 countries across Africa. And its4land is researching the semi-automated extraction of parcel boundaries from airborne laser scanning data.

Can we use and trust global platforms as Google, Microsoft Virtual Earth, Facebook and LinkedIn?

These global companies and their platforms are increasingly supporting, influencing and shaping our lives and commercial ventures. In many ways it's scary just how much power and influence they have. We need to trust them. So it's good that they can be challenged. In Europe, for example, Google stands accused of using its influence as a search engine to extend its power to adjacent businesses. As these global companies grow and become even more influential and powerful, then they will inevitably attract the regulator's attention. For example, Amazon's cloud computing arm, Amazon Web Services, powers its operations as well as those of other firms, including many involved in the land sector. If Amazon does become a utility for commerce then the calls will grow for its regulation. This can only build more trust.

How can we avoid situations in which land owners living in poverty sell their land for a very low price? How can they be protected?

Land rights initiatives that do not support communities in establishing systems for transparent, just and equitable administration of those lands will inevitably invite mismanagement, corruption and local elite capture. To address these concerns, registration of land rights must be accompanied by authentic land governance changes that help communities to establish intra-community mechanisms to ensure good governance, intra-community equity, sustainable natural resource use and authentic community approval for all transactions with outside investors. I like Namati's approach which has been successful in places like Liberia, Uganda and Mozambique.

Another innovative approach to avoid this unintended consequence has been adopted by Landmapp for their target customers of smallholder farming families. They not only provide official titles, but also create a profile with which smallholders can access technical and financial services precisely tailored to their circumstances. Packaging land rights with other services to improve livelihoods must be the way forward.

Does this involve considerable human resources such as surveyors and lawyers? Or can people do it themselves?

This is a key issue: we do not have sufficient land professionals to quickly scale up land rights programmes. For example, Uganda only has around 30 registered land surveyors. So the fit-for-purpose approach advocates the use of a network of locally trained land officers acting as trusted intermediaries and working with communities to support the identification and adjudication process. This approach builds trust with the communities and allows the process to be highly scalable. In Rwanda, over 100,000 people were employed over the

programme lifecycle and 800 local trusted intermediaries were employed at any one time. Land professionals need to effectively engage and support this new type of resource and maybe FIG should officially designate this new genre. And then there are the lawyers! Wherever possible, the land administration process should be administrative in nature rather than an integral part of the judicial process. This will remove one of the bottlenecks and free up court time to resolve the considerable number of land disputes.

Who will pay? Can investors be involved here? They don't want to be associated with headlines about land grabbing, do they?

You are correct. Land is perceived to be a high-risk agenda topic for politicians and potential investors, and this compounds the lack of interest and investment in land solutions. The fit-for-purpose land administration approach and the global campaign for security of tenure will only work once there is political will within countries. We need to work harder at obtaining this political understanding and desire to solve countries' land issues. Once the political will is strong enough, then the risk for investors will decline. We also have to adopt more sustainable business models to support the scaling up of land rights programmes.

There is wide support for the idea that you should not initiate land administration without a maintenance organisation. How will this be included in your idea?

It is essential in the fit-for-purpose approach to land administration that processes and resources to validate and maintain the land rights information are an integral part of the initial programme design and these should be in place from the first day of operation. The importance of this is often neglected and, once initial titles are issued, there is often little pressure to keep the registry information up to date. A network of trusted intermediaries must be retained to adopt this crucial role. It is estimated that an average five percent of all land rights will require maintenance annually. Mobile technology is ideal for this activity.

What have been the reactions to your initiative so far?

Deafening silence! I thought that the World Bank, DFID and USAID as the major players in the land sector would comment. But no, not even the Global Donor Working Group on Land has reacted. This lack of response has just emphasised the need for new players and leaders to enter the land sector.

What is your message to our readers?

This challenge of initiating a global campaign provides an opportunity for land professionals to rethink their strategy for coordinating, designing, communicating and solving global land issues. Inward-looking politicians must not sideline the global land issues, and land professionals need to retain their global perspective and values. So wake up, land professionals, and become part of this revolution and global campaign!

About Robin McLaren

Dr Robin McLaren is director of Know Edge Ltd, a UK-based, independent management consulting company formed in 1986. The company supports organisations to innovate and generate business benefits from their geospatial information. Robin has supported national governments in formulating national spatial data infrastructure (NSDI) strategies. He led the formulation of the UK Location Strategy and has supported similar initiatives in Kenya, Hungary, Iraq, Western Australia, Kuwait and Canada. He has also supported the implementation of the EU INSPIRE Directive in the UK and was a founding member of the UK Location Council. Robin is recognised as an expert in land information management and has worked extensively with the United Nations, World Bank and EU on land policy/land reform programmes to strengthen security of tenure and support economic reforms in Eastern and Central Europe, Africa, the Middle East and the Far East. He has co-authored the FIG/World Bank publication on fit-for-purpose land administration and the more detailed *Fit-For-Purpose Land Administration Guiding Principles* for the Global Land Tool Network, providing legal, spatial and institutional guidance aimed at developing countries. His recent research explores the innovative use of crowdsourcing to support citizens in directly capturing their land rights. His current interests are focused on integrated land management strategies and how to convince decision-makers to adopt fit-for-purpose land administration approaches.