

GIM International Interviews Dr Mika-Petteri Törhönen, Land Tenure Officer, UN Food and Agriculture Organisation

FAO Important Partner for FIG

According to FAO, access to land and other natural resources is a direct factor in the alleviation of hunger and rural poverty. Yet land-administration systems are struggling in many countries, mainly thanks to poor governance. Agencies are insufficiently funded for the tasks given them, personnel are underpaid, disillusioned and inadequately equipped for the job. Nevertheless, good governance in land administration is an attainable goal, given the will and demand. Dr Törhönen offers insight based on his own experience.

By Christiaan Lemmen, contributing editor, GIM International

The world faces serious challenges: urbanisation, climate change, with its effect on agriculture, access to water and land, and conflicts over them. What is the impact of all this on land policies?

Land matters. Providing secure access to land and other natural resources is essential for achievement of the World Food Summit Plan of Action and the Millen-

nium Development Goals. We are currently investigating land-tenure implications of climate change for the High-Level Conference on World Food Security and the Challenges of Climate Change and Bioenergy, to be held in Rome in June 2008. The results are pending, but it is clear that the severe demands on land and natural resources will continue to rise.

What is the FAO contribution with respect to land administration and land surveying?

FAO produces advice on themes connected to secure access to land. We are now focusing on climate change, emergencies, compulsory purchase, state land management, low-cost solutions, land-information and good governance. We publish a set of "guides" aimed at grass-roots organisations, technical authorities and policy-makers, and a practise orientated journal. See www.fao.org/nr/lten/lten_en.htm. We also assist in the field projects of member countries and are currently working with sixty projects across Asia, Central and Eastern Europe, Africa and Latin America. These include land-policy, land-consolidation and land-reform projects, but most concern land administration.

Your long experience in many countries enables you to judge good practice in land administration.

Most agree that a modern land-administration organisation is a service-oriented business organ-



Dr Mika-Petteri Törhönen, Finnish by birth, works for the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), which leads international efforts to defeat hunger. In 2006 there were 854 million hungry people, 70% in rural areas. FAO provides a neutral forum where all nations (now 191 member countries) meet as equals. The organisation is also a source of specialised knowledge. The FAO stand on land issues is that access to land and other natural resources is a direct factor in the alleviation of hunger and rural poverty. Dr Törhönen, here photographed on the roof terrace of the FAO building, also admits that 'one of many reasons for working in FAO is the roof terrace and its view...'

isation. When I began my career, the title registers of the Anglo-Saxon world, the Torrens land register and the remarkable Thai success in adopting it were the subject of widespread discussion. European land books, deed

registers and cadastres provided healthy competition. The current beauty contest, however, relates to business models, service standards and levels of sophistication in terms of IT and the web. For a long time the Dutch Cadastre was the benchmark; look now at the Lithuanians and their Centre of Registers! Swedes are proud of their e-government solutions; they are not alone in this achievement. But

rica have provided a challenge, but for most world settings best practise is also known. And yet land-administration systems struggle. The single biggest reason for this lies with governance. We have land-administration agencies everywhere that are not properly funded for the tasks given them. Personnel are underpaid and their capacities are inadequate. What is worse, personnel are disillusioned and

Do we all have to reinvent the wheel?

I'm most interested in what can be done in poor countries. The Kyrgyz Republic (gross national product USD1700 in 2004) provides a very interesting case. The Gosregister organisation operates a land and property register covering all areas of settlement and most of cultivation. It is self-financed and its three main offices operate paperless registration with a domestically developed IT solution. Other offices are in transition between the manual and digital systems. Document registration provides major input for the economy and social stability. Registered in 2007 were USD1.1 billion worth of mortgages (still low levels due to the overall economic situation) and liens (short agricultural loans using land as collateral). As Gosregister was founded 1999 and all this was achieved in record time with small investment, including World Bank credit of USD10 million and technical assistance from SIDA (Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency). There are issues and needs, and it's premature to talk about best practise, but considering the poor setting and the relative importance of the register to the country, my choice for today's best achievement in land administration is Gosregister.

Land administration in many countries is not very transparent or, put another way, not free of corruption. What is your view on this, also from the perspective of good governance?

The secret of successful land-administration systems is known. The rural areas of Af-

have little faith in things improving. These agencies have learned how to survive. Little groups have formed, collecting income where they can. Understandable as this is in many ways, it should not be accepted. Such land-administration services are uncontrollable, unaccountable and inefficient. They serve only the interests of a wealthy minority, leaving smallholders to an insecure fate, up against a web of very powerful interests and demands.

Can you develop pressure to change this?

Yes, we can. FAO, WB, GTZ, UN HABITAT, UNDP and others have united in promoting Good Governance in Land Tenure. We say that weak governance in land administration is unnecessary, see the Good Governance guide on our website. Good governance in land administration is an attainable goal, if there is both a will and demand. It does not solve all the problems, but it touches the majority in more agrarian societies. There are also more severe and systematic problems of governance, like elite-dominated grand corruption, which, with Habitat, we address in a forthcoming policy guide. The next step is an initiative for creating an international Code of Conduct for Good Governance in Land Tenure, which will bring the issues of governance in land tenure to the attention of policymakers across the globe.

You are much involved in the International Federation of Surveyors (FIG) commission on Cadastre and Land

Management. What is the relevance and use of this NGO's work?

FIG brings surveyors together and the message is that you are not alone. Most countries face similar and comparable challenges. The exchange of information is in itself important; we would know less today without it. FIG does not suffer from much protocol, which makes it dynamic. Think of the Cadastre 2014 publication, the FIG professional code of ethics and the FIG conferences in e-government. FIG was there first. Still, it is the FIG regional conferences that most appeal to me. I participated in one in Ghana that summoned close to a thousand African surveyors, who departed the conference with international knowledge: a seed which can potentially help millions in Africa towards more security of tenure. For me personally, FIG has been one of my avenues into the international profession. And the source of a lot of fun! FIG is also an important partner for FAO. We have worked together with the FIG valuation commission on producing a Guide on compulsory purchase and compensation. The right to just compensation is far from being a universal norm. With the FIG cadastral commission we have ongoing cooperation concerning the Free, Libre and Open Source software (FLOSS) for cadastre and land registration. I recently discovered I could select from a range of free GPS navigation software for my mobile phone, test and play: just great! But a Cadastre IT developer in a developing country has nothing much to play with. The development stops before it begins and pirated software is widespread. At the same time, most countries in the developed world have developed IT solutions for their cadastre and land registration. Why can't a data developer in the Kyrgyz Republic know and learn from data models etc of those solutions? Do we all have to reinvent the wheel? FIG has supported steps towards standardisation by standing for the Land Administration Domain Model. Can't we now together consider how we might lower the threshold for data develop-

ers with scarce resources to start developing their own solutions? The idea is to increase support and alternatives for grassroots Cadastre IT work.

...and other NGOs?

Civil societies for land affairs are very important. We work regularly with many of the large, international ones, like the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED), Foodfirst Information & Action Network (FIAN), and the International Land Coalition (ILC). However, it is the grassroots work that matters. Ten years ago the Cambodian civil society organised itself to contribute to the revision of Land Law. What seemed like a bilaterally loose engagement resulted in many contributions and amendments to legal content. For example, the law now recognises indigenous land rights, which originally attracted only marginal interest. This is a crucial question of live-

lihood for the hill tribes who live and hunt in commercially attractive forests. The law now backs their cause.

Originating from beautiful Finland, do you not find yourself designated a "foreigner" in many places on this planet?

I'd rather be a foreigner; the Finns are too serious for my taste... Being a foreigner has its ups and downs. Foreigner status comes with a licence to observe. Did you know that the Kyrgyz relish fermented horse milk? That the estate agent in Italy charges both lessee and lessor? Or that Bulgarians nod for disapproval? Foreign life is full of joy and wonder. But a foreigner can never relax; one needs to stay alert for the unexpected. And I miss "home" every night; that never changes. This work is tiring, but I've enjoyed it too. I have lived a privileged and protected foreign life, which is not the case with most. My sympathy goes to the millions of peo-

ple who are foreigners against their will.

What are the challenges of a job in a multi-national, multi-ethnic and multi-religious environment? Why should young professionals apply for such a job?

Well, it is indeed a challenge to work in a multi-you-name-it environment. FAO staff includes some two hundred nationalities and just as many sets of values. I'm often amazed at what people think important and what not. Everything we do is a compromise, but think of the alternative. Then we might as well call it quits on international cooperation on food and agriculture, not to mention other fields. How long would we survive? If you have a passion for the world and you are interested in the issues facing the people next door, you should try for it. It is not for everyone, but it may be for you. It can be fun and it is very much needed. ♦

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