

Legitimate Tenure Rights for Food Security, Climate Resilience and Ecosystem Restoration

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TMG Research's approach to responsible and inclusive land governance

Why do we focus on securing legitimate land rights?

to safeguard people from chronic poverty and food insecurity

Research, as well as practical experience in tackling chronic poverty, acknowledges the inextricable link between poverty and access to land. Evidence shows, for example, that incremental increases in access to land can have significant welfare effects. Importantly, this applies both to subsistence farmers as well as rural communities with more diversified sources of livelihood. To a large extent, many off-farm sources of income also depend on secure access to land and natural resources.

to provide an incentive for investing in ecosystem restoration

If poor or food-insecure resource users are to invest in more sustainable practices, they need to be able to reap the return of these investments. This is also true, if such investments require the reduced use of natural resources. While security of tenure is an important first step towards encouraging such investments, the livelihoods of small-scale producers are also increasingly impacted by accelerated land degradation and climate change. Smallholders are also negatively affected by intense pressure on arable land and natural resources from other land use priorities. The need to safeguard the legitimate land rights of the most vulnerable groups could not be more urgent.

to enable community-based natural resource management

Community-based management of forests, pastures, fisheries, and land is a key avenue to recognise legitimate land tenure rights, achieve sustainable livelihoods, and protect and restore ecosystems. Securing legitimate land tenure rights is an important precondition for such community-based governance to succeed. For this to happen, there is need for inclusive processes to define the extent of such resources, and to demarcate their boundaries. This also implies that legitimate resource users need arbitration and follow up mechanisms to act on possible rights violations.



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to create a space for local innovations for sustainable resource use

There is growing concern that we are rapidly approaching, or have exceeded, planetary boundaries of critical ecosystem services. To continue to feed a growing world population and achieve an adequate standard of living for all while cutting back on carbon emissions requires innovations. Since natural ecosystems have very specific characteristics, such innovations are often best developed at the local scale. However, many local communities are unable to secure a safe space to develop these innovations. Given the underlying power dynamics that lead to infringements of the land rights of the most “powerless,” a rights-based framework helps to underpin such local innovations. We consider securing legitimate land tenure rights to be a key step towards enabling community-led innovations.

to democratise the food system

Owning land often implies having political power. In many countries, land ownership is highly skewed. Recent analyses show that inequality in land ownership is increasing. This undermines opportunities to achieve more inclusive development. Hence, securing legitimate land tenure rights and the redistribution of rights are pathways towards equity and more democratic food systems.

The Voluntary Guidelines on Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land: Our Reference Point

The Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries, and Forests in the Context of National Food Security (VGGT) have been unanimously adopted by members of the UN Committee on World Food Security (CFS). They are the global standard of responsible governance of tenure of land that protect land tenure rights of all, in particular of the vulnerable and marginalised. Binding human rights agreements underpin the principles included in the VGGT.

Multi-level changemaking: Our approach to strengthening responsible land governance

Responsible land governance manifests locally but is the result of an interplay of conducive policies and their enforcement, on one hand, and collective action and innovation on the other. TMG works to understand, contextualise, and support processes that facilitate this interplay and hence tackle governance gaps at diverse levels. Building on participatory research at local level, we identify and co-design relevant solutions and social innovations that can be elevated into higher-level decision-making processes. In this way, we initiate change processes to strengthen responsible land governance and tackle urgent sustainability challenges. Thereby, we provide the missing link between community-led organisations – who are often locked out of dominant discourses – and governance processes at national and international level.

We work simultaneously across the following three levels:

Local level: We create space and strengthen community-based organisations and sub-national governance institutions to co-develop social innovations for land tenure security.

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National level: We work with governments, human rights institutions, and civil society networks to support the implementation of progressive national policies, also by building on progress made in global policy processes.

Global level: Through our broad research and policy networks we actively engage in identifying policy spaces and agenda setting to ensure that these ideas can be taken up and integrated into formal decision making and implementation.

What We Do: Examples of our work

Local and sub-national level: Social innovations to strengthen access to land for women and youth

In densely populated western Kenya, increasing land fragmentation coupled with patriarchal inheritance customs have contributed to a chronic shortage of land, especially for women and youth. While land leasing can provide immediate access for food production and livelihood needs, legal safeguards are often insufficient. Together with our partner, Shibuye Community Health Workers, we facilitated an innovative process to develop community-endorsed land lease guidelines, giving women and youth more confidence to invest on leased land. By supporting direct dialogue between communities and key decision makers – notably the recently launched annual Governor’s Day with Farmers” – we are further contributing to the institutionalisation of these emerging innovations within crucial policy processes.



Through a similar bottom-up process co-designed with TMG’s partners in Burkina Faso, women can now negotiate land use rights to family land controlled by male relatives.

[*Read more.*](#)

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National level: Monitoring implementation of the UNCCD Land Tenure decision

In Kenya and Benin TMG partnered with local organisations to document, in a participatory mapping process, the tenure rights of forest adjacent communities in areas targeted by Land Degradation Neutrality (LDN) measures. The mapping revealed that a focus on forest conservation and restoration by restricting access to forests directly impacts on the tenure rights of forest-adjacent communities and, in turn, affect their food security and livelihoods. The findings reveal that failing to prioritise tenure issues in the implementation of policy mechanisms may inadvertently undermine broader land governance objectives.

The process underscores the importance accounting for communities' legitimate tenure rights, and especially their rights to forest land and resources within processes of LDN implementation and forest restoration.



A woman collecting firewood in Kereita forest, Kenya

Global level: the Human Rights & Land Navigator

Land rights can be protected by holding governments accountable for living up to their obligation to protect, respect and fulfil land-related human rights. Together with the Danish Institute of Human Rights and the Malawi Human Rights Commission, TMG is developing a set of tools that allow for the monitoring of land governance from a human rights perspective. With a focus on human rights standards that underpin the 2012 Voluntary Guidelines on Responsible Governance of Tenure (VGGT), the Human Rights & Land Navigator enables land and human rights actors to understand which human rights are at stake in specific land issues. Once applicable human rights obligations have been identified, human rights advocates can back up land claims, and advocate for improved policies to protect land rights. The Navigator provides a powerful instrument for strengthening the application of the VGGT and holding states accountable for securing access to land for marginalised land users.

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Video still from The Human Rights & Land Navigator promotional video

For more information, please contact:

Jes Weigelt, Head of Programmes
jes.weigelt@tmg-thinktank.com

TMG - Think Tank for Sustainability

TMG Research gGmbH

EUREF-Campus 6-9

10829 Berlin, Germany

Phone: (+49) 30 92 10 74 07_00

Email: comms@tmg-thinktank.com

Website: www.tmg-thinktank.com

Twitter: [@tmg_think](https://twitter.com/tmg_think)

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