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THE STATUS OF LAND TENURE AND GOVERNANCE

IN BRIEF

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Tenure security and responsible land governance are crucial. They not only ensure productive, environmentally sustainable land use, but also guarantee rights over land, control of it, and decision-making about its use.

Secure land rights play a vital role in cultural identity, and responsible governance empowers individuals and communities.

Secure land rights give them confidence in their land, encouraging investment, improving agricultural productivity, and enabling access to financial services. Together, these outcomes help reduce poverty and foster peace and stability.

The last two decades have seen progress in land tenure and governance, particularly at the international and national policy levels.

New global frameworks on land include the Framework and Guidelines on Land Policy in Africa (F&G) and the Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests (VGGT), as well as the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Peasants (UNDROP) and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP). Against this backdrop, since the adoption of the VGGT in 2012, 71 countries – representing 36 percent of the global total – have undertaken some form of land reform, 27 of which (38 percent) explicitly referenced the VGGT to varying extents.

However, progress is lagging behind in practice.

Worldwide, only 35 percent of land is formally documented, meaning its ownership, tenure, or use rights are officially recorded in recognized registries or cadasters. More than 1.1 billion people, about 23 percent of the global adult population, feel land-insecure and consider it likely or very likely that they could lose the rights to some or all of their land and housing within the next five years. Although global frameworks have been widely adopted, the uptake and implementation of principles for responsible land governance remain limited.

This brief highlights the key findings of the Status of Land Tenure and Governance report, which seeks to generate and share reliable data, evidence, and analysis on land tenure and governance.

The report brings together data and consolidates information from diverse sources (including governments, civil society and research) across different levels (ranging from local to global). As a first report, it provides a baseline for future work, offering insights into the current state and emerging trends in land tenure, land rights, and land governance globally.

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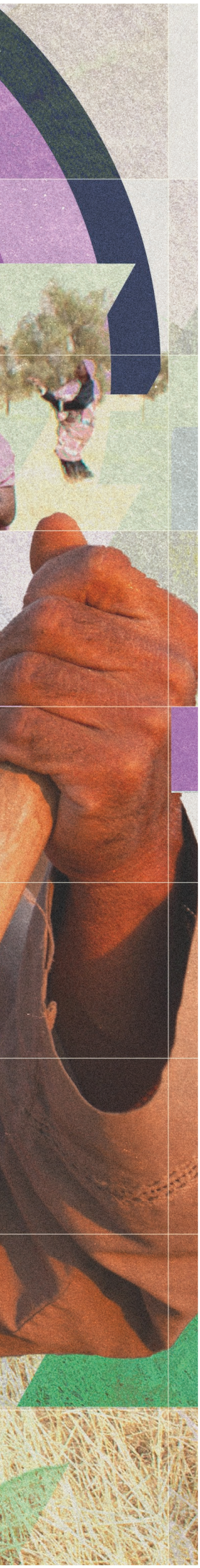
Effective decision-making requires robust data but land tenure data is often scarce, politically sensitive, and underreported.



Land tenure and governance data

While land data have evolved and strengthened significantly in recent years, evidence on land tenure remains weak. Methodological and capacity issues as well as political sensitivities generally result in lower availability, completeness, and openness of land tenure data than in other sectors, which benefit from well-established reporting practices. Limited reporting on Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) indicators 1.4.2, 5.a.1, and 5.a.2 illustrates this challenge. This gap hampers efforts to document the state of land tenure and governance, constrains inclusive, evidence-based decision making, and ultimately slows progress towards tenure security and the achievement of the SDGs as a whole.

Improvements in benchmarking and the ratification of reporting frameworks have been acompanied by the spread and refinement of land tenure data initiatives and tools. These developments have resulted in several significant, currently active land tenure data initiatives, which vary in geographical scope (local, national, regional, and global), type (from geospatial to quantitative data), and methodology (for example, household surveys, agricultural censuses, and community-level participatory mapping).

The proliferation of these initiatives has contributed, at least in part, to the democratization of data collection and access. Today's more open data landscape includes official government sources (for example, agricultural censuses, farm registries) alongside research and innovation, including geospatial technologies. Citizen- and community-led processes have further contributed to this diversification.

Democratic data are also broader data. As more groups and initiatives select their focus and refine their methodologies, insights are being gained into a wider range of themes, including women's land rights, land inequality and concentration, and violence against land and its defenders. This trend is also clearly illustrated by the increasing availability of land data for and by Indigenous Peoples.

However, the availability of land data, particularly land tenure data, is much lower than in other sectors with longer-established reporting traditions, such as public finance, procurement, and health. Together with data on political integrity, land tenure data are among the least available globally. For the 105 countries assessed in 2022, the average score for land tenure data availability was only 16 out of 100 – less than half the availability of data on land use and about a third of that for public finance and public procurement.

The collection of land tenure data remains more time- and cost-intensive, relying heavily on traditional methods such as systematic updates of cadastral records and large-scale surveys.

The majority of countries have no robust framework for collecting and publishing data on land tenure. According to Global Land Barometer results from 2022, 59 of the 105 countries assessed (56 percent) lack such frameworks and do not have detailed, structured land tenure data available online for re-use. Availability is particularly scarce in Africa: of the 23 countries assessed, only four scored positively. These results do not appear to correlate with economic status, as several high-income countries also recorded a zero score on land tenure data availability.

Data quality is just as important as data quantity. Most countries assessed (32 out of 42) perform relatively better on openness, with an average score of 43 out of 100, compared to completeness, which is 30. Nonetheless, both dimensions remain far from fully realized. Scores also vary widely within and between countries. Africa performs significantly lower, with average scores of 23 on openness and 32 on completeness.

Significant gaps exist in the availability of sex- and age-disaggregated data, particularly for customary lands. A key gap concerns the comprehensive capture of the full bundle of land rights and decision-making authority, as agricultural and household surveys rarely provide this information. Moreover, individuals, especially women, who report owning land may not hold the full spectrum of rights, which are often shared with other household or community members.

Data gaps are mirrored by shortcomings in global land reporting processes. Despite recognition of land rights in the SDGs, reporting on the three core land indicators remains limited. Only 12 countries worldwide have reported on all three indicators. As of March 2025, the latest official data used for this report shows the following:

- ***SDG 1.4.2:*** 63 countries have reported on the proportion of people with legally recognized documentation of their land rights, while 27 countries have reported on the perception of tenure security.
- ***SDG 5.a.1:*** 49 countries have reported on the proportion of women with ownership or secure rights over agricultural land.
- ***SDG 5.a.2:*** 83 countries have reported on whether their legal frameworks, including customary law, guarantee women's equal rights to land ownership and control.

Significant differences in SDG reporting appear across regions and indicators. Africa records the highest rate of countries reporting for each of the three indicators.

Nonetheless, a significant acceleration in SDG reporting on land tenure is evident at the global level. It reflects not only the increasing focus on the centrality of land particularly for environmental and climate-related purposes – but also additional efforts by custodian agencies, slight adaptations of methodologies and data sources, growing awareness among countries of the need for data and reporting, and mid-term evaluations of progress toward Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development. Despite these advances, all three indicators remain classified as 'Tier II', underscoring the continuing need to expand data collection and reporting efforts.

Shifts in data production signify a move towards a more collaborative and participatory model of data governance. Efforts to strengthen reporting on land-related SDGs include methodological adjustments, such as the use of proxies, better mobilization of existing data collection tools (for example, the Demographic Health Survey (DHS) and the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS)). They also include the incorporation of non-formal data sources, including research, community data, and citizen-generated data. The approach marks a new chapter in the social contract between state institutions and citizens. It embodies principles of transparency, participation, and shared responsibility, reflecting an evolving relationship in which citizens are not merely subjects of governance but active participants in it.

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Who owns the world's lands, and who feels secure in their rights to land?

The state of land tenure

States have legal ownership of over 64 percent of land worldwide, which includes public land, customary land with designated tenure rights or legal recognition but without documented ownership, unrecognized customary land and states' private asset arrangements. In addition to land under states' legal ownership, 26 percent is known to be owned privately by individuals, companies or collectives. For the remaining approximately 10 percent of the world's lands, tenure status is unknown.

In practice, the picture changes significantly, as state lands may be assigned, even permanently, to others (for example, state land used privately under leasehold or concession agreements, or customary land under state ownership). The main types of land tenure systems in practice around the world can be summarized as follows:

- ***28 percent (3.7 billion hectares (ha))*** of the world's land is public land, owned and managed by states;
- ***42 percent (5.5 billion ha)*** is customary land;
- ***18 percent (2.4 billion ha)*** is owned by private individuals and corporations;
- ***2 percent (0.2 billion ha)*** operates under states' private asset arrangements.

Land tenure systems vary across regions. In sub-Saharan Africa, 73 percent of land is held under customary tenure, with only 1 percent formally recognized as such. Most of this land remains undocumented and under state ownership. In Eastern and South-eastern Asia, state land dominates, at 51 percent, while only 9 percent of land in the region is privately held. On the other extreme, in North America, Latin America and the Caribbean, and Europe (excluding the Russian Federation, where state land dominates), private ownership of land is widespread, at 32 percent, 39 percent, and 55 percent respectively.

Documentation is lagging behind. Worldwide, when combining documented customary lands, documented public lands, and private lands, just over 35 percent of land can be considered formally documented. This leaves 55 percent of the land undocumented, in addition to 10 percent of land with an unclear status.

Indigenous Peoples, and holders of customary tenure rights occupy 5.5 billion ha (42 percent) of the world's land; yet only 1 billion ha (8 percent of global land) are documented with ownership rights. For the remaining 34 percent of customary lands that are not fully recognized and documented, 13 percent (1.7 billion ha) are under designated use rights, while 21 percent (2.7 billion ha) remain unrecognized by governments. Additionally, customary communities may hold documentation granting them certain rights to land under state ownership; these rights are often more limited in scope or duration. Customary lands with such relatively limited documented rights account for 7 percent of the total 13 percent of state lands under designated collective use rights.

In most countries, the share of adults who possess legally recognized documentation over land remains low. Based on SDG indicator 1.4.2, in 43 of the 63 countries that reported, fewer than half of the population have such documentation. In 14 countries, the figure is below 10 percent. Similarly for SDG 5.a.1: in 32 of the 49 reporting countries, less than 50 percent of the agricultural population has ownership or secure rights over the land they rely on.

Tenure insecurity remains high globally, with some regions particularly affected. According to the Property Rights Index (Prindex) 2024 Global Survey, about 1.1 billion people (23 percent of the adult population) consider it likely or very likely that they could lose the right to some or all of their land and housing within the next five years. This aligns with SDG 1.4.2 data from 85 countries, which show that 71.5 percent of the population reports having secure tenure. Regionally, land tenure insecurity is highest in the Middle East and North Africa (29 percent), Eastern Asia (26 percent) and sub-Saharan Africa (26 percent), while Southern Asia has the lowest level at 18 percent.

Tenure insecurity continues to rise. Between 2020 and 2024, the share of the global adult population who reported feeling insecure about their rights for any land and housing property increased from 19 percent to 23 percent, according to Prindex. Much of this increase relate to negative shocks, including global political and financial instability as well as numerous conflicts. In addition to increased displacements, the most frequent cause of rising land insecurity is related to the lack of financial resources, for example, to pay rent, mortgage, property tax or utilities, presently also significantly affecting high-income (a six-percentage point increase) and upper-middle-income countries (a nine-percentage point increase).

Customary communities often experience higher land insecurity. Contributing factors include historical injustices, ongoing conflict, and encroachment. Despite legal frameworks recognizing their collective land rights, communities continue to face challenges in obtaining and maintaining land ownership and benefiting from it. In Colombia, for example, the perceived individual and collective tenure insecurity of customary communities is approximately 2.5 times higher than the national average (79 percent compared to 32 percent), as assessed by Prindex.

Nevertheless, customary land ownership, whether collective or individual, even if not documented, can enhance land security. This is particularly the case in contexts where formal individual land titles are not the norm or are insufficient. Despite low rates of land documentation in many countries, a large share of the population reports feeling secure in their land tenure. The contrast is especially noticeable in sub-Saharan Africa, where formal documentation is limited, yet people often report relatively high levels of perceived tenure security.

Beyond limited access to land, youth also experience significantly higher tenure insecurity. Youth perception of tenure insecurity is 20 percent higher than the 25–54 year age group and twice as high as that of their older counterparts (55 years and older). Youth access to land is hindered by barriers such as delayed inheritance of land, land fragmentation arising from intergenerational subdivision of land, rising land prices and limited access to capital. Youth voices are largely excluded from governance structures and decision-making processes related to land matters, at all levels, including land reforms and large-scale land sales.

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When women do have secure rights to land, myriad benefits tend to follow. These rights are fundamental, yet not sufficiently addressed.

Women's land rights

Globally, women are significantly less likely than men to own or have secure rights to land for housing or agriculture. In 2024, across 108 countries, 48 percent of men and 40 percent of women reported being sole or joint homeowners: a decline since 2020, with ownership falling by seven percentage points for women and three for men. While rural residents are more likely than urban residents to report ownership, women remain consistently disadvantaged in both settings.

In agriculture, gender disparities are even more pronounced. In 43 of 49 countries with data, men in agricultural households are more likely than women to own or have secure rights to land, with the gender gap exceeding 20 percentage points in nearly half of them. Evidence from several African countries shows that this gap is especially pronounced in sole ownership.

Joint ownership plays a crucial role in improving women's access to land, particularly in contexts where sole ownership by women remains limited. In the countries assessed, mainly in sub-Saharan Africa, the share of household land jointly owned by women and men ranges from 18 percent in Malawi, where women also own a significant share of the land independently, to 58 percent in Ethiopia.

Women are consistently less likely than men to hold legally documented land ownership, as shown by data from 51 countries reporting on SDG 1.4.2. The share of adults with such documentation varies widely across regions, with sub-Saharan Africa showing particularly low overall rates.

Formal and legal documents are an important step toward securing women's land rights. Yet without changing norms, social support systems and economic means to enforce them, tenure security often remains fragile. Globally, female landowners are significantly more likely to report tenure insecurity than male owners when asked about their rights in hypothetical situations such as divorce or the death of a spouse.

This disparity is particularly pronounced in countries across sub-Saharan Africa, Southern Asia, South-eastern, and Western Asia. However, gaps in tenure insecurity in the event of divorce or spousal death among landowners tend to decrease and even close with economic development.

Tenure insecurity for women varies by socioeconomic status and other social and demographic characteristics. Rural women and women in larger households face greater tenure insecurity in the case of divorce and widowhood. Younger women (aged 15–34 years) feel less tenure secure than older women. Additionally, women with secondary or higher education are less likely to worry about losing their main property or agricultural land, reflecting greater awareness of land rights, bargaining power, and economic wealth and autonomy.

While constitutional gender equality provisions are common, many countries' legal frameworks fall short of fully recognizing and protecting women's land rights. Among 91 countries reporting on SDG 5.a.2, 49 percent have adopted no or limited legal measures aligned with the SDG 5.a.2 proxies.

Corrective measures to promote women's land rights are generally lacking. Different legal measures are adopted to varying extents, though the use of important actions such as quotas or the allocation of financial resources remains limited. Only one-third of countries reporting on SDG 5.a.2 require jointly owned land to be registered in the names of both spouses, with far lower rates in sub-Saharan Africa (25 percent) and Western Asia (8 percent). Globally, 38 percent of reporting countries do not guarantee equal inheritance rights for women and men, or for girls and boys, in cases without a will. This gap increases the risk that customary or religious norms may override gender-neutral provisions. Over half of countries (56 percent) require spousal consent for transactions involving jointly held land. This mandate is widespread across Europe, Asia, sub-Saharan Africa, and Latin America and the Caribbean.

Important regional differences exist in legal safeguards for women's land rights. Equal inheritance rights are common in Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean, and Asia, but rare in Western Asia and sub-Saharan Africa. Spousal consent for land transactions involving matrimonial property is frequent, especially in Europe, but less so in Western Asia. Quotas for women's participation in land administration are more prevalent in sub-Saharan Africa than elsewhere. Joint registration of matrimonial property occurs more often in Asia and Latin America, while financial support to increase women's land ownership or tenure security is generally uncommon. Western Asia lags behind in adopting legal measures aligned with SDG 5.a.2.

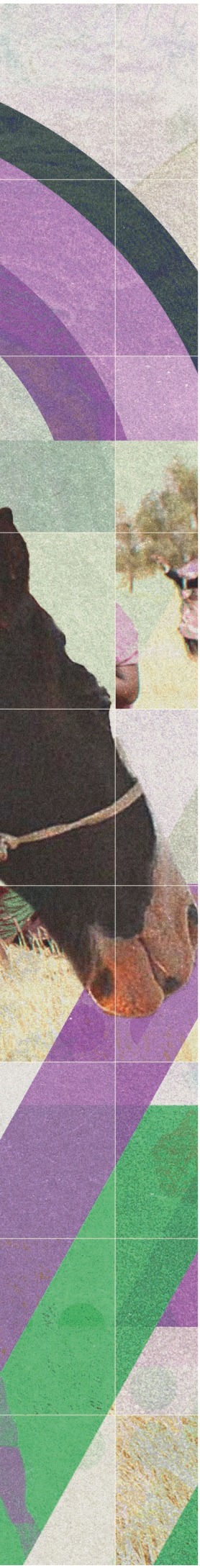
Women's rights are often inadequately protected in customary land tenure systems. Of the 45 countries explicitly recognizing customary law or customary land tenure, only 25 have legal provisions asserting that the principle of non-discrimination or gender equality takes precedence over customary law in case of conflict. In sub-Saharan Africa, 16 of the 28 reporting countries recognize customary law and guarantee gender equality in land rights within customary communities, often as a result of recent land reforms. In Latin America, 7 out of 18 countries protect gender equality, usually through constitutional protections rather than specific land laws.

In some countries, the legal framework partially acknowledges customary rights, but with significant restrictions, and these laws typically do not address gender issues in a way that meets the SDG 5.a.2 requirements.

Legal adoption does not automatically translate into improved women's land rights. While stronger legal protections for women's land rights are linked to lower perceived tenure insecurity, they do not automatically close the gender gap in ownership. Countries often adopt these legal reforms precisely because of severe existing gender inequalities, which makes effective implementation even more critical. Challenges such as limited literacy, poor access to justice, and weak local governance often render these new laws ineffective, especially in rural areas, creating a vicious cycle where a lack of resources and information prevents women from claiming their rights.

Many countries continue to face delays in harmonizing gender and land-related legislation across sectors, hindering progress towards global human rights commitments on substantive equality for women and girls. Progress is particularly slow where reforms intersect with family law, which is closely linked to cultural and religious norms. While constitutional protections for equality have advanced, changes to family and customary law, which determine many aspects of women's land rights under SDG 5.a.2, remain limited and proceed slowly.

Once regarded as archaic or relics of the past, customary land systems are increasingly seen as vital, for people and the planet.



Customary lands in a changing climate

Customary land systems are crucial for delivering significant climate and nature solutions. Globally, Indigenous Peoples, and other customary communities are considered among the most effective stewards of forests, grasslands, wetlands and fisheries, managing landscapes rich in carbon, biodiversity, and cultural heritage. These lands and territories, often governed through customary governance structures, carry profound spiritual and cultural significance, underpinning local belief systems, identity and knowledge, as well as livelihoods and well-being, and broader climate change mitigation, adaptation, and biodiversity conservation and restoration goals.

Current mapping of customary lands remains partial, from both a quantitative and qualitative perspective. An estimated 4.2 billion ha of customary lands have been mapped worldwide, representing 77 percent of all reported customary lands (5.5 billion ha), and over 32 percent of the Earth's terrestrial surface (13 billion ha, excluding Antarctica). However, over 60 percent of the maps are indicative, with their legal status remaining unclear. Of the estimated 4.2 billion ha of mapped customary lands worldwide, 30 percent is in North America and Europe (with large tracts in the Russian Federation), 28 percent in Africa, 18 percent in Asia and 12 percent in both Latin America and the Caribbean, and Oceania.

A significant proportion of the world's critical ecosystems are found within customary lands, underscoring the importance of securing land rights. Mapped customary communities' lands are largely covered by forests (37 percent), grasslands and savannahs (28 percent), deserts (20 percent), glacial/tundra (14 percent), as well as important coastal and wetland ecosystems such as peatlands. These biomes not only support the livelihoods and cultural identity of customary communities, but also maintain the planet's ecological balance, conserving biodiversity, and regulating the global climate through the provision of water regulation, soil fertility, and carbon storage services.

Analysis shows that 19 percent of intact forest landscapes, 15 percent of irreversible carbon hotspots, and 7 percent of key biodiversity areas on mapped customary lands lack formal government recognition. This figure is likely an underestimate due to data gaps.

Forests found on land held and managed by customary communities are among the most stable and continuous. Globally mapped customary lands account for approximately 40 percent of the world's total Intact Forest Landscape area, equivalent to an estimated 1.13 billion ha. In addition, 32 percent of the world's stable forests (those least at risk of land-use conversion) are located within customary managed lands, particularly those territories governed by Indigenous Peoples. These forests are essential for long-term ecosystem integrity.

Customarily managed lands overlap with 33 percent of the world's critical biodiversity habitats, identified by the International Union for Conservation of Nature's (IUCN) as key biodiversity areas, covering over 400 million ha of these globally vital ecosystems. When limiting data analysis to countries with map-coverage, 84 percent of customary lands overlap with these areas, representing an estimated 33 percent of the total global key biodiversity areas.

Critical ecosystems in mapped customary territories hold an estimated 45 gigatons (Gt) of irrecoverable carbon, which represents 37 percent of the global total of 50.63 Gt. Forest biomes dominate this carbon storage capacity, accounting for 85 percent of the total. Analysis also shows that an estimated 80 percent of global peatlands, approximately 390 million ha, are located in lands under customary tenure, representing 29 percent of the world's irrecoverable carbon stocks.

Recognizing customary tenure rights remains crucial, yet progress is incomplete. State-led reforms, decentralization, and organized advocacy have advanced the devolution and restoration of customary tenure rights across Africa, Asia, and particularly Latin America. The establishment of community forest management, social forestry, concessions, and co-management arrangements has created diverse legal pathways for communities to access, manage, and benefit from forest resources. Recent climate mitigation initiatives, such as the UN's Reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation in developing countries (REDD+) climate framework, which incentivizes developing countries to conserve forests, have further promoted customary land titling, making tenure security a prerequisite for accessing climate finance.

The recognition and enforcement of tenure rights is frequently undermined. The implementation of legal frameworks is hampered by weak governance, poor inter-institutional coordination, gaps in technical and financial capacity gaps, resource constraints, and broader structural challenges, including outdated maps and documentation, bureaucratic hurdles, and political resistance, including lack of will or incentive to enforce customary land rights.

These challenges are particularly evident in communities affected by encroachment pressures linked to illicit activities, illegal logging and mining, land invasions, and violent competition over resources from more powerful actors.

Managing customary lands for climate and environmental goals can involve opportunity costs and socioeconomic trade-offs, such as exacerbating disparities in income and access to services like sanitation. Because securing tenure rights can at times limit local economic options or exacerbate internal inequalities, it is essential to examine issues such as uneven access to resources, benefit-sharing and cost allocation among local populations. Accounting for the trade-offs and impacts of current climate mitigation policies on land and people is a critical first step toward designing more sustainable, effective and equitable climate strategies.

Customary lands are threatened by growing anthropogenic pressures, including "green" initiatives. Alongside familiar threats such as urban expansion, transport infrastructure, large-scale industrial agriculture, oil and gas extraction, and mining, some climate solutions are increasing land pressures. Renewable energy, biofuels, conservation, and carbon offset projects are expanding. Paradoxically, these policies are placing intense pressure on customary lands, particularly those lacking formal recognition or protection, displacing communities, eroding governance systems, and intensifying inequality, especially among women and youth.

Customary tenure systems are evolving to navigate the complex demands and pressures of the global economy. While these systems can serve as crucial foundations for environmental conservation and climate action, growing urbanization, market integration, and changing well-being needs are eroding the traditional institutions and knowledge systems that support socio-ecological sustainability. Scaling direct financing, strengthening legal frameworks and institutions, and valuing and integrating the local knowledge of customary groups are essential pathways to support their contributions to global climate and biodiversity goals. The continuity of customary groups, and the critical ecosystems and landscapes they manage, is closely intertwined with the recognition of their land rights and self-determination.

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Beyond identifying land tenure and tenure (in)security, it is also essential to understand how land is distributed, including patterns of ownership and control.

Trends in land tenure distribution and concentration

Approximately 582 million agricultural holdings operate globally, according to the most recent and comprehensive estimates, based on data from 131 countries and territories. Considering the agricultural land area for all countries in the sample (2.9 billion ha), the average holding size is 5 ha. However, average holding sizes vary significantly by region, from 0.8 ha in Eastern and South-eastern Asia to over 200 ha in North America and 1 750 ha in Oceania.

The distribution of global agricultural land holdings is deeply unequal with only 15 percent larger than 2 ha, yet representing 91 percent of the world's farmland. Over 400 million agricultural holdings are smaller than 2 ha, constituting 85 percent of units. These holdings account for only around 9 percent of total farmland. On the upper end of the distribution, it is estimated that the largest farms – those of 1 000 ha or more – operate more than half of the world's farmland, despite making up only around 0.1 percent of all holdings. At the other end of the spectrum, numerous smallholders operate on very small plots, highlighting fragmentation.

On average, the top 10 percent of the largest landholders operate around 56 percent of the land; in global aggregate terms, however, this represents around 89 percent of the land. In contrast to averages between countries - which treat each country equally - the aggregates combine all landholders across countries. Such aggregation gives more weight to larger countries but provides a more accurate representation of the land area as a whole. The smallest 40 percent of landholders operate on an average of about 6 percent of the farmland, which in aggregate is just above a 1 percent share of the farmland. These patterns of land inequality confirm earlier findings highlighting that the largest 1 percent of farms operate more than 70 percent of the world's farmland.

North America, Latin America and the Caribbean, and Oceania are the most concentrated regions in terms of land distribution. On average, the largest 10 percent of landholders in these regions operate 70 percent, 68 percent and 64 percent of farmland respectively, which when estimated aggregated across countries represents 79 percent, 88 percent and even 93 percent of the farmland.

Europe and Central Asia illustrate a specific case. On average the largest 10 percent of landholders in these countries operate 59 percent of the farmland, representing 96 percent of the farmland in aggregated estimates. At the other end of the spectrum are Southern and Eastern Asian countries, as well as Africa. In line with its stable trend in farmland distribution, Southern Asia shows the most equal land distribution patterns: the top 10 percent of the landholders operate 41 percent of the farmland on average, representing 37 percent of the land in aggregated estimations, while the smallest 40 percent of landholders operate 9 percent on average and 10 percent of the farmland in aggregated estimations. Africa is very similar, except for a couple of outliers such as South Africa, which has a highly concentrated land distribution.

Land inequality appears even more severe when factors such as land rights, land quality, and landlessness are taken into account. Considering only documented or alienable land rights consistently increases measured inequality across all sampled countries, with the sharpest disparities observed in sub-Saharan Africa. In countries such as Mali, Niger, and Guinea-Bissau, the top 10 percent of landholders control all documented land, while the bottom 40 percent hold none – this pattern is also evident in Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, Senegal, and Togo. In Latin America, the share of land held by the top 10 percent similarly rises substantially under the documented-land metric. By contrast, countries in Asia, such as Cambodia and Myanmar, show minimal differences, suggesting that land access is more evenly distributed regardless of tenure security. Overall, these findings underscore that when the analysis focuses on secure, documented (and often private) land, a more pronounced degree of land concentration is revealed than what total landholdings alone would suggest.

Commercial interest in land persists, with large-scale land acquisitions (LSLAs) and financialized shareholding-owned entities currently driving land concentration. Both reflect continued interest in farmland, particularly in the wake of the 2008–2009 food and financial crises, under conditions, policies and practices that favour large-scale industrial farming and corporate investments. Lands once considered of marginal investment interest in the early 2000s have become highly sought after by investors and speculators. Since 2000, peaking around 2010, foreign as well as major domestic investors have acquired 26.7 million ha of agricultural land worldwide, according to Land Matrix data. Africa alone accounts for 42 percent of these deals, totaling approximately 10 million ha. With an average size of 29 000 ha, these deals contribute to patterns of concentration.

Environmental concerns and climate change increasingly drive new large-scale acquisitions. Demand for land is rising for conservation, carbon storage, and sustainable management, prompting shifts in land use and property rights. While precise figures on land for biodiversity offsets remain unclear, the 2022 Land Gap Report warns that current national net-zero pledges imply land-based carbon removals requiring nearly

1.2 billion ha, about the size of all global cropland. This over-reliance on land-based solutions could trigger a new global land rush, far exceeding the initial agricultural one of 2008–2009.

Corporate entities and financial capital firms have become the main investors in land. Over the past decade, corporate and financial capital companies grew most significantly, with a range of new actors and alliances including pension funds, venture capitalists, and commodity traders. These companies presently account for approximately 70 percent of large-scale land transactions tracked. The most significant growth, both in the number of deals and the total area under contract, has been attributed to pension funds, which make up 51 percent of entities in this category.

Changes in ownership and use are becoming increasingly difficult to monitor and document. The vast majority (73 percent) of actors involved in these investments function as shareholders. Their corporate shareholding structures can reduce transparency in the land sector and may limit the effectiveness of traditional tools used to regulate land size and control (generally based on physical land transactions). This situation allows for potentially undetected and thus uncontrolled land accumulation. While these trends are global, they evolve in different ways. In developing countries, they result from large-scale land acquisitions and investments; in North America, Europe and other major economies, they appear to be fully embedded in rural economies. The case of France is illustrative, where corporate holdings, currently representing 42 percent of farm units, manage more than 67 percent of the national utilized agricultural area (UAA). Until recently, before updated regulations were introduced through two successive laws in 2014 and 2021, these practices went unaccounted for, and the extent of these trends and their impacts remained undocumented. This is the case in most, if not all other countries affected by these trends, making it difficult to assess the real extent of land concentration globally.

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After two decades of international guidance on responsible land and tenure governance, progress has been made mainly at policy level.

Progress, pressures and pushback in land and tenure security

From global and regional frameworks to national land reform, progress is occurring mainly at policy level. As mentioned earlier, growing recognition of land governance challenges has led to the development of several international guidance frameworks, namely the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP, 2007), the Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests (VGGT, 2012) and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas (UNDROP, 2018), among others. An assessment for this report found that since the VGGT were endorsed by the Committee on World Food Security in 2012, 71 countries (36 percent globally) have undertaken some form of land reform, including 31 countries in Africa - nearly 60 percent of the continent. Reform activity peaked around 2015–16, shortly after major frameworks such as the Framework and Guidelines on Land Policy in Africa (F&G) and the VGGT were launched. Land governance considerations are increasingly being integrated across sectors, notably climate, but also gender equality, food security, Indigenous Peoples' rights, peacebuilding, labour, migration, and youth.

The uptake of international land guidance is more nuanced, however. In some cases, international principles have been clearly integrated into national frameworks. Broader efforts to encourage adoption, however, have produced mixed results, and the lack of systematic monitoring makes it difficult to assess their impact. A global review of policy processes since the 2012 endorsement of the VGGT shows their influence at a broad policy level: of the 71 countries that adopted significant land tenure-related policies or laws, 27 (38 percent) referenced the VGGT to varying extents, led by Africa (13 countries) and South-eastern Asia (6 countries).

The uptake of specific principles for responsible land governance remains limited. An assessment of land policies and laws in 172 countries reveals that adoption of the evaluated principles ranges from only 20 to 30 percent of countries. Provisions for human rights related to land remain particularly low, with just 20 percent of countries fully incorporating them, and more than 60 percent making no reference to them in their land policies.

Other principles, including responsible investment, transparency and accountability, gender, consultation, and Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC), also show low uptake. In contrast, principles recognizing customary land rights, expropriation and compensation, protection of legitimate tenure rights, and access to legal support show diverging patterns. While 30 to 40 percent of countries do not adopt these principles at all, many partially incorporate them.

Progress is lagging in practice, due to a lack of implementation and enforcement. Land policy implementation often receives less attention than other areas because of its complexity, slow and long-term impact, and competing national priorities. Despite its importance for sustainable development, environmental protection, and economic growth, the implementation of land policy is frequently underfunded and hindered by bureaucratic inefficiencies or resistance from powerful actors. The case of women's land rights exemplified this. As shown, improvements in legal frameworks for women's land rights (SDG 5.a.2) do not necessarily translate into gains in practice, illustrating the persistent gap between law and implementation. Furthermore, monitoring the implementation of these policies and legal instruments remains weak. The absence of reliable tracking tools and data obstructs efforts to assess whether policies and international guidelines are truly being applied. Limited reporting on land-related SDG indicators underscores this.

Non-compliance with land rights is a widespread issue globally, particularly in developing countries and in areas with complex or contested land tenure systems. The issue is especially evident in land investments. A recent Land Matrix Initiative assessment of LSLAs in Africa found low compliance with the VGGT, despite policy progress over the past decade. Of the African LSLA deals assessed, 78 percent complied with less than half of the VGGT principles, and 20 percent showed no compliance at all. At the national level, 87 percent of assessed countries had less than 50 percent VGGT compliance in their LSLA portfolios. Across the continent, the weakest areas were: i) lack of inclusive consultation, ii) failure to respect national land and investment laws, and iii) disregard for legitimate tenure rights, including informal and customary rights. Against this backdrop, basic safeguards for tenure rights – such as access to impartial dispute resolution, protection against unlawful expropriation, and fair compensation – remain limited. Mechanisms to uphold human rights and to provide effective legal or administrative recourse are often weak.

A key challenge is the persistent lack of transparency in land governance, particularly concerning LSLAs. Although some progress has been made, most LSLA data remain incomplete or unavailable. Only a handful of countries provide substantial information. The best performers cover about 30 percent of the variables used to monitor VGGT principles in land investment; most countries report only 5 to 20 percent. This lack of transparency undermines responsible investment and limits the reliability of any monitoring.

Recent climate and carbon offset projects show little improvement. Despite limited data, results indicate that one in four such deals does not comply with core VGGT principles. Common issues include a lack of transparency on financial terms, the absence of proper community consultation or Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) (25 percent), unresolved land conflicts (22 percent), and environmental harm (22 percent). The findings also reveal major gaps in equity and community well-being. The findings highlight the urgent need to strengthen oversight and compliance in these land investments, particularly where violations are frequent and severe. Addressing these issues is crucial to ensure responsible land governance and fair outcomes for local communities, especially as climate and carbon projects expand rapidly.

Efforts are being made to increase compliance with responsible land governance, but challenges remain, compounded by evolving practices and actors in the land sector. Several initiatives based on internationally adopted standards - such as the EU Directive 2024/1760 on Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence - are being implemented. While these measures represent progress, translating them into real change on the ground will take time, reflecting the complexity of implementation and resistance from some countries and influential lobbying groups.

Compliance challenges are further exacerbated by shareholding structures and other financial mechanisms controlling land, which are largely invisible in many countries. This lack of transparency hinders understanding of their scope and impact and complicates, if not obstructs, enforcement. The issue is intensified as many corporate and shareholding entities investing in land are now registered offshore and increasingly based in tax havens.

Data highlights

Land data, especially land tenure data, remain scarce

- With an average score of 16.7, land tenure data are three times less available than data from sectors such as public procurement and finance.
- 56 percent of the 59 countries assessed lack a robust framework for collecting and publishing land tenure data.
- Eight years into the 2030 Agenda, none of the land indicators are classified as Tier I. Only 27, 49, and 83 countries have officially reported on SDG 1.4.2, SDG 5.a.1, and SDG 5.a.2 respectively.

Who owns the world's land?

- In practice, 28 percent (3.7 billion ha) of land worldwide is public land managed by states, 18 percent (2.4 billion ha) is privately owned, and 42 percent (5.5 billion ha) is customary land.
- While customary land constitutes 42 percent of the world's total, only 8 percent (1 billion ha) is formally recognized with documented ownership rights. Of the 34 percent not recognized or documented, 13 percent (1.7 billion ha) is under designated use rights and 21 percent (2.7 billion ha) remains unrecognized by governments.
- Sub-Saharan Africa has the highest share of land under customary tenure (73 percent) and the lowest share of such land being legally recognized (1 percent).

Tenure insecurity is high and rising

- 23 percent of the global adult population (about 1.1 billion people) believe it is likely or very likely that they could lose the right to some or all of their land or housing property within the next five years.
- From 2020 to 2024, the share of people feeling insecure about their land or housing rights rose from 19 percent to 23 percent.
- Tenure insecurity is highest in the Middle East and North Africa (29 percent), Eastern Asia (26 percent), and sub-Saharan Africa (26 percent), while Southern Asia has the lowest level (18 percent).
- Among youth aged 18–24, 22 percent feel insecure about their homes, compared to 11 percent of those over 55.
- People with documentation are nearly half as likely (18 percent) to feel tenure insecure compared to those without documentation (35 percent).

Women's land rights still lag behind

- In 43 of 49 countries with data, men are more likely than women to own or have secure rights to land. In nearly half of these countries, the gender gap exceeds 20 percentage points.
- Globally, women typically own a much smaller share of agricultural land, both jointly and solely, compared to men. In some African countries, women solely own just 3 percent of household land, compared to 28 percent for men.
- Nearly half of the countries report meeting only two or fewer of the six legal proxies under SDG indicator 5.a.2, revealing persistent legal gaps.
- Of 91 countries reporting on SDG 5.a.2, 49 percent have adopted no or limited legal measures to protect women's land rights, and 38 percent do not ensure equal inheritance rights for women and men in cases where no will exists.
- Mandatory quotas for women's participation in land administration exist in 26 of the 91 countries, 15 of which are in sub-Saharan Africa.
- Of the 45 countries recognizing customary law, only 25 include legal provisions that uphold non-discrimination or gender equality over customary practices in cases of conflict.

Customary landholders are custodians of the environment, but their tenure rights are under threat

- Collectively managed lands contain 37 percent of all irrecoverable carbon globally (50.63 Gt), with forest biomes accounting for 85 percent of this carbon.
- Peatlands on customary lands span about 390 million ha, covering 80 percent of the global total and storing 29 percent of irrecoverable carbon.
- 84 percent of customary lands overlap with key biodiversity areas (KBAs), representing 33 percent of the global total.
- Approximately 40 percent of intact forest landscapes (1.13 billion ha) lie on customary lands, which also hold 32 percent of the world's stable forests.
- 19 percent of intact forests are on unrecognized customary lands, as are 15 percent of irrecoverable carbon hotspots and 7 percent of KBAs.
- Nearly 60 percent of customary lands across 64 countries are under threat from industrial activities. These include renewable energy projects (42 percent), oil and gas extraction (18 percent), commercial agriculture (14 percent), mining (9 percent), and urbanization (4 percent).

High levels of land concentration

- The largest farms (over 1 000 ha) manage more than half of the world's farmland, even though they represent just 0.1 percent of all farms.
- On average, the largest 10 percent of landholders manage 56 percent of land. Estimated aggregating globally across countries, they control about 89 percent of land.
- Globally, 400 million agricultural holdings (85 percent of all farms) are smaller than 2 ha and account for only about 9 percent of total farmland. The smallest 40 percent of landholders operate just 6 percent on average, which amounts to just over 1 percent when estimated aggregating globally.
- When factoring in tenure security, inequality increases even further. When only documented or alienable land rights are considered, land inequality increases across all assessed countries; in three out of 13 African countries assessed, the top 10 percent of holdings control all documented land, while the bottom 40 percent have none – a pattern evident in 50 percent of the African countries.
- Corporate and financial companies account for 70 percent of large-scale land transactions, with pension funds making up 51 percent. 73 percent of these entities operate on a shareholder basis.

Towards responsible land governance?

- Since the endorsement of the VGGT in 2012, 71 countries (36 percent) have undertaken some form of land policy reform. Of these, 27 (38 percent) referenced the VGGT. In Africa, 57 percent of countries have initiated reforms.
- Uptake of responsible land governance principles remains limited. Only 20 percent of the 172 countries assessed fully incorporate human rights principles in land policies, while 60 percent do not refer to them at all.
- Among African large-scale land acquisition deals assessed, 78 percent complied with fewer than half of the VGGT principles. Twenty percent showed no compliance. The most common violations involve lack of inclusive consultation, failure to respect national laws, and disregard for legitimate tenure rights.
- Transparency remains a major gap. Most countries report on only 5 to 20 percent of the variables used to monitor VGGT principles in land investments.

Policy highlights

Focus on policy implementation

1 Strong political commitment and broad societal engagement are crucial for translating policy progress into measurable outcomes. To build momentum, track progress against the SDGs, and hold stakeholders accountable, it is necessary to secure new and reinforced country-level commitments on land tenure security. These commitments should be agreed upon by all actors within existing frameworks (such as the VGGT, F&G, UNDROP and UNDRIP, among others) and across sectors including economic recovery, climate action, biodiversity, and open societies.

Equitable and inclusive governance in times of increased pressure on land

2 For land governance to be effective, an enabling environment is needed - one that moves beyond top-down, technocratic approaches toward inclusive, rights-based governance. This means ensuring equitable representation in decision-making processes and guaranteeing that all rights holders have an equal voice and the ability to influence policies. It also requires addressing inequalities, promoting transparency, and building trust between citizens and institutions to foster a sense of belonging, participation, and accountability.

Securing land for all

3 Land is fundamental to the right to food, the right to adequate housing, and other rights recognized under international human rights law. Everyone should have the right to feel stable and secure in their housing and land, free from fear of eviction or displacement. Land tenure policies must serve a dual function: recognizing the legitimate tenure rights of all rights holders, and supporting inclusive and resilient rural development and sustainable food systems. Actions required include achieving gender equality, expanding youth access to land, supporting small-scale producers in need of land to escape poverty, and linking recognition of land rights to access to climate finance for adaptation and mitigation practices.

Securing women's land rights

4 Ensuring women's land rights requires equal access to land ownership, inheritance, and participation in land-related decision-making. It also involves addressing structural inequalities and cultural norms that limit women's access to land. Gender-responsive legal and policy frameworks are vital and must be harmonized across different laws and sectors, particularly in contexts characterized by legal pluralism. Since women can hold land through various arrangements (formal or informal, individual or collective, private or communal), focusing on land tenure security rather than solely on formal titles is essential.

Securing customary land rights

5 Efforts to legally recognize and protect the rights of customary land users must be accelerated for the benefit of both people and the planet. Beyond legal recognition, most communities require financial and technical support to address local social, economic, and environmental challenges. These initiatives include community resource management and co-management arrangements that treat customary communities as equal partners in designing and implementing climate solutions. Upholding the principles of FPIC, respecting self-determination, and integrating Indigenous knowledge into land, climate, and governance frameworks are all critical.

Addressing growing land inequalities

6 High land concentration combined with limited access for smaller farms can pose social and economic sustainability risks, particularly when non-farm job creation stalls. A range of policy measures, including redistributive approaches where contextually appropriate, remain possible options to reduce rural poverty, enhance food security, mitigate social and political tensions, and revitalize rural economies. In settings where redistribution is not feasible owing to land scarcity or political constraints, alternative measures such as rent and tenancy controls, as well as regulations against excessive land concentration, should be considered.

Adapted financing and strengthened partnerships

7 In addition to increased funding, more effective and tailored financing is also needed. Differentiated funding mechanisms can more effectively reach those on the ground and strengthen their land rights, as well as support responsible land governance. Mainstreaming land tenure in national and sectoral budgets, across agriculture, forestry, infrastructure, and climate sectors, can help scale up funding while ensuring that land tenure is integrated into broader planning and investment strategies.

Strengthening data, evidence, and transparency

8 Land data must be continuously developed and improved to reflect the diverse, complex, and evolving dynamics of tenure and governance. Current pressures and rapidly changing contexts shape these dynamics. Beyond the use of new technologies and innovative metrics, it is vital to support community-led research, use complementary data sources, and draw on traditional knowledge systems. Strengthening land data is not just a technical objective; it directly supports transparency, accountability, more equitable power relations, and broader development outcomes.

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