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BRINGING LAND BACK TO THE AGENDA:

Why Land Reform and its Implementation is Vital for Sustainable Development in Africa and Beyond

Climate change, food insecurity, biodiversity loss, and conflict rightly command global urgency. Yet land policy reform — fundamental to addressing these crises — remains sidelined. Weak land governance can fuel conflict, undermines climate action, and limits agricultural productivity. For billions across Africa and the Global South, land is more than a resource: it is livelihood, cultural identity, and economic security. Without equitable and secure land rights, many of the Sustainable Development Goals — from ending hunger to tackling climate change — will remain out of reach.

Despite this, land governance is still treated as a niche issue: underfunded, siloed, and abandoned before reforms move from paper to practice.

From 10–13 November, the Sixth **Conference on Land Policy in Africa (CLPA)** will convene in Addis Ababa, hosted by the African Union Commission, the African Development Bank, and the UN Economic Commission for Africa. Under the theme “Land Governance, Justice and Reparations for Africans and Descendants of the African Diaspora,” it centers land in justice, equity, and sustainable futures — and calls on the global community to rethink its role.

It is time to treat land governance as a cornerstone of sustainable development. Shifting from fragmented, prescriptive interventions to catalytic support can empower local institutions and communities to lead in turning policies into food security, peace, and a just transition.

LESSONS FROM INTERNATIONAL SUPPORT FOR RESPONSIBLE LAND GOVERNANCE

More than a decade ago, the global “land rush”, with a surge of large-scale agricultural investments, exposed the human costs of weak land governance and dispossession of communities. In response, frameworks like the [AU Framework and Guidelines on Land Policy](#) (2009) and the [UN Voluntary Guidelines on Tenure](#) (VGGTs, 2012) drove reforms in 71 countries, more than half in Africa.¹ Yet momentum has faded while pressures on

land — from climate change to population growth and land-based investment — continue to intensify.

Through the **Land for Life initiative** and together with local partners, Welthungerhilfe has supported the application of these frameworks in Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Liberia, and Sierra Leone since 2017 through inclusive multi-actor land platforms.

¹ Source: Global Land Observatory (FAO, ILC, CIRAD), forthcoming State of Land Tenure and Governance Report.

Emerging lessons must inform future support:

LEGAL REFORMS MATTER — BUT ARE ONLY THE FIRST STEP:

Land reforms in many countries have strengthened community land rights, advanced women's tenure, and created clearer safeguards around large-scale investments. These gains deserve recognition — but they mark only the beginning of a longer journey. Major legal, institutional, and practical gaps persist, driven by weak implementation, entrenched social norms, limited public awareness, and under-resourced local land administrations.

All too often, financial and political support — domestic and international — wanes once policies are adopted. The result is strong laws on paper but uneven delivery in practice. Today, only 35% of land users under customary systems hold legally recognized and documented rights, leaving billions vulnerable to displacement and exploitation. Uptake of key VGGT principles — including gender equality, free, prior and informed consent (FPIC), and access to legal aid and dispute-resolution mechanisms — remains limited in practice.²

Unless these gaps are closed and commitments are translated into action, hard-won progress risks stalling — or even reversing.

Evidence from **Land for Life: Liberia** shows how weak implementation can erode progress. The 2018 Land Rights Act was groundbreaking in recognizing customary tenure, but enforcement lags: limited funding and weak local governance mean only about 68 communities have formalized their titles, leaving many others vulnerable. Members of Liberia's Multi-Actor Platform on Land warn that mounting pressure from private investment in carbon markets, agriculture, and mining — often on customary lands — is fueling discussions to amend the Act. Proposed changes could exclude communities from carbon and land deal decisions and weaken the very tenure protections the law was designed to secure.³

LAND GOVERNANCE IS TREATED AS A SILO

Land governance determines who can use, manage, and benefit from natural resources. Without secure rights, communities cannot invest in sustainable practices; governments struggle to deliver climate and food security strategies; and women and marginalized groups remain excluded. Yet land governance is often detached from national and international climate, biodiversity, and food systems planning. Ministries and institutions continue to operate in silos, and land-focused forums frequently “preach to the converted” rather than foster true cross-sector collaboration. Land Tenure is still insufficiently integrated into international nexus frameworks, such as the Rio conventions, e.g. on climate (UNFCCC) and biodiversity (CBD).⁴

Evidence from **Land for Life: Consultations** by the Plateforme Multi-Acteurs sur le Foncier (Multi-Actor Platform on Land) show that land tenure remains weakly integrated into Burkina Faso's climate action plans and National Determined Contributions (NDC). Land laws and communities — especially women and grassroots actors — were sidelined. As a result, community land rights are weakly recognized within climate strategies, undermining both resilience and mitigation efforts. Without secure rights and control over their land and territories, communities remain vulnerable and cannot contribute effectively to national climate goals — leaving vast potential for food security, carbon sequestration, adaptation, and stability untapped.

COORDINATION AND LOCALIZATION REMAIN WEAK

Fragmented approaches, and donor-driven priorities continue to undermine the effectiveness and sustainability of land reform in Africa. Country-level and international interventions are often poorly coordinated, and existing coordination platforms frequently fail to align stakeholders around shared strategies and goals. As a result, international efforts often run in parallel, leading to duplication, competition for influence, and inconsistent approaches to community engagement.

Power imbalances between actors in the Global North and South persist. While the African Union and national governments have strong potential to lead and localize international support, institutional and political constraints, such as lacking resources, capacities and mandate, continue to limit their ability to drive coherent, sustained action across the continent. Localization remains a challenge: communities, CSOs, and local authorities often lack decision-making power, capacity, and predictable financing to secure customary rights and negotiate land and carbon deals, leaving land governance vulnerable to external agendas.

Shifting from competitive to genuinely complementary approaches remains a core challenge. Yet greater coordination and power shifting — through joint planning, pooled resources, risk-sharing and aligned monitoring — would meaningfully strengthen land reform efforts and ensure they deliver lasting results.⁵

THE ROLE OF THE PRIVATE SECTOR AS AN ALLY FOR LAND REFORM IS UNDERUTILIZED

Persistent mistrust between sectors, combined with weak integration of land governance and human rights standards into corporate accountability and sustainability frameworks, continues to limit effective private-sector engagement. Today, 78% of large-scale land acquisitions in Africa comply with fewer than half of VGGT principles — meaning many communities still

² Source: GLO (forthcoming) State of Land Tenure and Governance Report.) And: LC and Welthungerhilfe, *Learning from 10 Years of Implementing the Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure*, June 2023

³ Source: Action Aid 2025: Communiqué Carbon Market in Liberia

⁴ Source: Report PMAF 2025, https://pmaf-bf.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/Final-Dokument-Orientierung-Foncier-CDN-BFA_PMAF-SP-CNDD-ILC-RCCWCA_-juillet-2025.docx_VF-Def.pdf

⁵ Source: African Union: Call to Action Conference on Land Policy in Africa 2023

face rights violations through land expropriation, loss of resource access, exclusion from decision-making, or even violence.

Weak land governance also exposes businesses to major risks, including traceability challenges, investment-area disputes, supply-chain disruptions, and reputational damage. Yet many companies remain reactive, prioritizing conflict mitigation over supporting strong governance systems.

With clear rules, transparency, and accountability, land investments can deliver shared benefits. The private sector could be a powerful ally in advancing equitable, local land governance — a potential that remains largely untapped.⁶

OUR CALL TO ACTION

Addressing these issues requires governments, regional bodies, donors, and the private sector to prioritize land governance, align support, and shift power to local actors.

1. Invest in land reform as a long-term, holistic process

Land governance must be recognized as a foundation for climate, food systems, biodiversity, peacebuilding, and national development agendas. Integration into global initiatives should strengthen — not replace — the core priorities: securing land rights and effectively implementing land laws.

Governments and international partners must treat land reform as a long-term, systemic process requiring sustained investment, institutional capacity, infrastructure, and societal change.

2. Integrate land governance into other international and national processes

To ensure that key global agendas reinforce rather than undermine one another, land governance must be systematically integrated into international and national frameworks — including the Rio Conventions — and vice versa. The UNCCD's incorporation of the VGGT offers a model which other conventions can build on.

Upcoming milestones, such as the ICARRD+20 conference on agrarian reform in Colombia and the UN Climate Conference COP30 in Brazil, offer important opportunities to bring stakeholders together and accelerate a more holistic, coordinated approach to land reform.

3. Strengthen coordination and put local actors in the lead

Responsible land governance is complex and requires coordinated action — especially amid shrinking funding.

National governments must lead in aligning and embedding international support in coherent strategies and action plans. A regional coordination mechanism, for example led by the AU, could further harmonize efforts at the continental level.

Existing global platforms — including the Global Donor Working Group on Land and the [Global Action for Land](#) — should strengthen their convening role, foster collaboration, pool resources and align more closely with national and regional priorities. Localization must move beyond participation toward real power-shifting, including decision-making authority and control over resources.

4. Support and scale multi-stakeholder partnerships

Multi-stakeholder partnerships have proven effective in advancing progress across these action areas. When designed inclusively — at national and local levels — and facilitated transparently, they can improve coordination, strengthen accountability, shift mindsets, and empower marginalized groups in land governance.

For these partnerships to succeed, they need strong government leadership and flexible, long-term support from international partners — including a shift from project-based to pooled funding. Multi-stakeholder platforms should serve not only as consultation forums but be formally connected to policy and decision-making processes.

5. Advance human-rights due diligence and constructive private-sector engagement

Limited private-sector engagement often stems from long-standing mutual mistrust, but this disconnect hampers meaningful collaboration and progress.

When power imbalances are recognized and addressed — and when human-rights due diligence and accountability are built into partnerships — the private sector can be a strong ally in advancing local governance. Legally binding due-diligence frameworks offer an important foundation and incentive for cooperation, while a shift from “blame and shame” to constructive, trust-building engagement is equally essential to foster genuine partnership.



In Sierra Leone, the Customary Land Rights Act and National Land Commission Act adopted in 2022 strengthened the land rights of women. An important and celebrated first step in a longer process of turning policies into change on the ground.

CONCLUSION

Land governance is the foundation of climate resilience, food security, gender equality, peace, and economic transformation. Without sustained and coordinated implementation of land reforms, progress will remain fragile and achieved gains could be lost. Pressures from climate change, carbon markets, and competing land interests are rising — making land governance a defining challenge for Africa and the world.

This is a moment for collective leadership and shared responsibility. Elevating land governance can unlock Africa's potential, making land a source of equity and prosperity rather than conflict.

The choice is clear: land governance can either remain fragmented and underfunded — or become a driver of systemic change that Africa and the world urgently need.



Das DZI Spenden-Siegel bescheinigt der Welthungerhilfe seit 1992 den effizienten und verantwortungsvollen Umgang mit den ihr anvertrauten Mitteln.

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