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THE STATUS OF LAND TENURE AND GOVERNANCE

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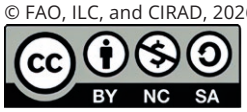

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The report was developed through an inclusive and consultative process. Firstly, a representative (by type of actor, sector, and geography) *Technical Reference Group* (TRG) steered the process, with several members contributing directly to the report. Secondly, the process was supported by an *Advisory Group* (AG), which, broader in nature, contributed through advice and guidance. Thirdly, a three-tier review process combined internal review with an open consultation at the *Global Land Forum* (June 2025, Bogota, Colombia) and a broad open call for comments engaging the wider land community and beyond. Ultimately, the inclusive and consultative nature of the process – bringing together diverse expertise and stakeholders and integrating a broad ecosystem of formal and complementary data sets and sources – fostered rich, and at times contrasting, analytical processes that deepened the understanding of the complexities and specificities of land tenure and governance.

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Peer review

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Advisory Group (AG)

The GLO AG has a broader, open membership base, composed of land data experts as well as non-technical members. It gives all a voice into the report and, as such, is critically important to the orientation and uptake of the report and its results. It includes governments representatives, research institutes and think tanks, representatives from civil society and other platforms (such as the Civil Society and Indigenous Peoples Mechanism [CSIPM] of the Committee for Food Security [CFS]), Private Sector representation (such as the Private Sector Mechanism [PSM] of the CFS), and representatives of the Global Donor Working Group on Land (GDWGL) and southern regional formations, to ensure equal voice across types of actors from North and South.

Production, translation, editing and communication

Yasmine Iqbal (FAO) led the production of the report. Richard Crompton (independent writer) in his role as writer supported extensively the alignment and harmonization of content across chapters and contributors. Creative design and graphic templates were provided by Federico Pinci (independent designer), with extensive support from Francesco Zampaglioni (independent designer). Frans de Foglio (CONLING Language & Translation Consultants) copy-edited the document and translated the report in Spanish and French. Additional support for translations was provided by Jorge Rincon Barajas (FAO), Coline Damieux Verdeau (FAO), Antoine Hochet (FAO), Phillipe Karpe (FAO/CIRAD) and Estelle Nuñez (FAO).

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Foreword

Ensuring the rights and strengthening the management and governance of land and natural resources are essential for the 2.5 billion people, nearly a third of humanity, who depend directly on land for their livelihoods and food security. Land tenure is central to multiple dimensions of resilient and inclusive agrifood systems transformation, including access to heathy diets, equal prosperity, addressing climate change and maintaining biodiversity. Land is also fundamental to assuring peace, stability and security.

Above all, land tenure is about belonging, identity, cultural values and meanings, all grounded in lived experience and distinct ways of knowing. Land tenure, and its governance, are also about stewardship, taking responsibility for the health and productivity of land and ensuring that it can continue to support human well-being and a healthy environment for generations to come. It is also about the rules, processes, and institutions that dictate how land is accessed, used, managed, controlled and owned.

Despite this importance, the implementation of national and global policies on land tenure and governance continues to lag behind. Worldwide, only 35 percent of land is formally documented. 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.

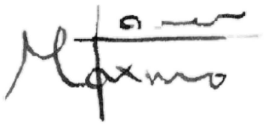
Work to strengthen land tenure and governance remains constrained by the scarcity of concrete data and evidence. While land data have evolved and strengthened significantly in recent years, evidence on land tenure remains weak. This report, co-published by FAO, the International Land Coalition (ILC) and the French agricultural research and international cooperation organization (CIRAD), is both necessary and timely. It aims to generate and provide data, evidence and analyses, which contribute to informing and documenting the state of land tenure, land rights and land governance globally. The report aims to provide policymakers, intergovernmental organizations, civil society, the private sector, and academia with a clear reference point for data on land tenure and governance.

The exercise itself has reinforced collaboration and synergies, assuring the complementarity of data sources and initiatives and enriching data and evidence on land tenure and governance. As such, we hope that the report will facilitate scaling up policy on land tenure and governance by providing the broader land and other sectoral communities with solid, accessible and recognized evidence.

Ultimately, the report will amplify land tenure and governance issues and raise awareness of the importance of land for sustainable development and other global challenges, such as climate change, land degradation, biodiversity conservation, income and gender inequalities, and thus, in achieving the SDGs.

In addition to this report on land tenure and governance, FAO published two other major publications focused on land in 2025: The State of Food and Agriculture (SOFA) report focuses on the challenge of degradation to productivity and pathways for sustainability, whereas the State of the World's Land and Water Resources for Food and Agriculture (SOLAW) looks at the potential to produce more and better through sustainable land and water resources management solutions, without jeopardizing the environment. The three reports together exemplify FAO's engagement on land, while reinforcing the interconnectedness of ecological, economic, and social systems.

FAO, ILC and CIRAD co-developed this report through an inclusive process engaging numerous actors from academia, think-tanks, civil society and grassroots organizations. We look forward to working with all stakeholders to ensure that the messages of this and FAO's two other 2025 reports on land lead to stronger uptake, and ultimately, effective progress and change on land tenure and governance.



Abbreviations

ALLIED	Alliance for Land, Indigenous and Environmental Defenders
ANGOC	Asian NGO Coalition for Agrarian Reform and Rural Development
AU	African Union
CAADP	Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme
CBD	Convention on Biological Diversity
CBTRs	community-based forest tenure regimes
CEDAW	Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women
CFS	Committee on World Food Security
CGD	Citizen-generated data
CIESIN	Center for International Earth Science Information Network
CIRAD	*Centre de Coopération Internationale en Recherche Agronomique pour le Développement*
COP	Conference of Parties
CSO	civil society organization
DHS	Demographic Health Survey
DRDLR	Department of Rural Development and Land Reform
EHCVM	Enquête Harmonisée sur le Conditions de Vie des Ménages
EMRIP	Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples
EU	European Union
F&G	Framework and Guidelines on Land Policy in Africa
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations
FIAN	Foodfirst Information and Action Network
FILAC	Fund for the Development of the Indigenous Peoples of Latin America and the Caribbean
FPIC	Free Prior and Informed Consent
GDP	gross domestic product
GIZ	*Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit*
GLO	Global Land Observatory
GLTN	Global Land Tool Network
HRBAD	Human Rights-Based Approach to Data
ICARRD	International Conference on Agrarian Reform and Rural Development
ICESCR	International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights
IDLO	International Development Law Organization
IFAD	International Fund for Agricultural Development
IFL	Intact Forest Landscape
ILC	International Land Coalition
ILO	International Labour Organization
INDER	*Instituto de Desarrollo Rural*
IPBES	Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services
IPES-Food	International Panel of Experts on Sustainable Food Systems
IUCN	International Union for Conservation of Nature
IWGIA	International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs
KBA	Key Biodiversity Areas
LAT	Legal Assessment Tool
LDC	least developed countries
LDN	land degradation neutrality
LSLAs	Large-scale land acquisitions
LSMS-ISA	Living Standards Measurement Study-Integrated Surveys on Agriculture
MICS	Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
NEPAD	New Partnership for Africa's Development
ODI	Overseas Development Institute
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OHCHR	Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights
PAPLRA	Presidential Advisory Panel on Land Reform and Agriculture
RAI	Responsible Investment in Agriculture and Food Systems
RED	Renewable Energy Directive
REDD+	Reducing Emission from Deforestation and Forest Degradation
RRI	Rights and Resources Initiative
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SIDS	Small Island Developing States
SOLI	State of Land Information
SPARC	Supporting Pastoralism and Agriculture in Recurrent and Protracted Crises
TMG	Think Tank for Sustainability
UAA	utilized agricultural area
UEMOA	Unione economica e monetaria ovest-africana
UN	United Nations
UNCCD	United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification
UNDESA	United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNDRIP	United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples
UNDROP	United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas
UNSD	United Nations Statistics Division
UNEP	United Nations Environment Programme
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNGA	United Nations General Assembly
UNHRC	United Nations Human Rights Council
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund
UNPFII	United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
VGGEWGE	Voluntary Guidelines on Gender Equality and Women's and Girls' Empowerment in the context of Food and Nutrition Security
VGGT	Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests in the Context of National Food Security
WBL	Women, Business and the Law
WCARRD	World Conference on Agrarian Reform and Rural Development
WJP	World Justice Project
WWF	World Wildlife Fund

IN BRIEF

BRIEF

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.

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.

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.

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.

Customary lands in a changing climate

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

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.

In brief

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. These changes in ownership and use, commonly referred to as corporatization or financialization, are becoming increasingly difficult to be tracked and documented by traditional land monitoring instruments (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.

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).

Extreme land inequalities

- 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 When land is concentrated in the hands of a few, especially in contexts where non-farm job creation is slow and rural poverty is persistent, it can lead to unsustainable social and economic outcomes. In countries with available public or private land, redistributive measures should not be excluded as policy options to reduce poverty, improve food security, address social 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.

The eradication of hunger and poverty, and the sustainable use of the environment, depend in large measure on how people, communities, and others gain access to land, fisheries, and forests. The livelihoods of many, particularly the rural poor, are based on secure and equitable access to and control over these resources. They are the source of food and shelter; the basis for social, cultural, and religious practices; and a central factor in economic growth.

FAO, 2012, p. iv

Chapter 1

LAND TENURE AND LAND GOVERNANCE: THE BROADER CONTEXT

The case and scope of this report

Tenure security and responsible land governance are crucial. Beyond ensuring productive land use that is balanced with environmental sustainability, they secure rights over land, control of it, and decision-making about its use. Playing a vital role in cultural identity, secure land rights and responsible governance empower individuals and communities, enabling them to feel confident about their land, invest in it, improve agricultural productivity, and access financial services. These outcomes help reduce poverty and promote peace and stability.

The recognition of the importance and centrality of land tenure for inclusive and sustainable development is reflected in its inclusion in global frameworks such as the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD), and more recently, in the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD). On the one hand, this underscores the role states play in delivering on these international commitments. On the other hand, it highlights the need and provides frameworks for monitoring progress on the implementation and impacts of these commitments (and on land tenure and governance overall).

Despite these policy advancements at the international level, the fact remains that more than a billion people worldwide do not feel their rights to land or home are secure (Prindex, 2024; further discussion in Chapter 3).

Weak land governance is recognized to be a contributor to unsustainable land use and deforestation, fuelling conflict and human rights abuses, marginalizing the poor and disadvantaged, and preventing responsible investment in land needed to create jobs and sustain livelihoods.

Additionally, while it has evolved and strengthened significantly over the last 15 years, evidence on land tenure remains weak.

The availability, completeness, and openness of land tenure data are generally lower than in other sectors, which benefit from well-established reporting traditions and fewer political sensitivities. The limited reporting on Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) indicators 1.4.2, 5.a.1, and 5.a.2 illustrates this challenge. It not only hampers efforts to document the status of land tenure and governance, but also constrains inclusive, evidence-based decision making and ultimately limits progress toward tenure security and the Sustainable Development Goals as a whole.

Objective of this report

To address the above challenges and shortcomings, this report aims to generate and provide data, evidence, and analyses on the status of land tenure and governance.

More specifically, this report aims to:

1. ***Inform and document the state of, and trends in, land tenure, land rights, and land governance globally.*** It provides data and evidence at national and local levels, allowing for disaggregation by gender, tenure systems, and population groups such as Indigenous Peoples, and other customary landholders.
2. ***Bring together and scale up land data*** to strengthen and enrich data and evidence on land tenure and governance. The report will provide more robust data through better collaboration, synergies, and complementarity.
3. ***Highlight the issues and raise awareness*** of the importance of land for sustainable development and other global challenges (such as climate change, land degradation, biodiversity conservation, and income and gender inequalities), thus contributing to achieving the SDGs.
4. ***Scale up policy engagement on land tenure and governance*** by providing the broader land community with solid, accessible, and recognized evidence. The report will enable the documentation of overall progress on key land governance issues at local, national, and global levels in relation to relevant SDGs. It also covers the implementation of the Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries, and Forests in the Context of National Food Security (VGGT), and other relevant land-related commitments and frameworks.

The report aims to provide policymakers, intergovernmental organizations, civil society, the private sector, and academia with a clear reference point for data on land tenure and governance.

Focus and scope

A first baseline report

This report on the status of land tenure and governance is a baseline, presenting and assessing existing data and extracting insights, patterns, and evolutions within land tenure and governance. This first report is an overview, describing land tenure, (in)security, and governance overall, rather than comprehensively covering all aspects related to land tenure. Numerous topics of great relevance in this field, such as land markets, land conflicts, and the relationship between tenure, investment, productivity and food security, among others, can be better addressed in future work, instead of overcrowding and under-examining in this report. This is a deliberate choice to ensure these topics receive the thorough attention they deserve.

A rural land focus

Although the report reflects on land tenure overall and touches upon urban land, it is primarily concerned with rural land and its various tenure systems and dynamics. It focuses on agricultural land, forestry, and other natural ecosystems, as well as the relationship between different land tenure systems and rural communities. The significant differences between urban and rural land tenure systems, their dynamics, and regulatory and governance frameworks make it challenging to cover them both comprehensively. When relevant, urban tenure aspects will still be integrated into the assessments and databases. In some cases, especially in global databases, it might not be possible to disaggregate rural from urban. When this is the case, explicit reference will be made, and attention will be drawn to the analytical biases this can entail.

Land tenure in the broad sense

Land tenure and governance of natural resources are closely linked, creating a complex interrelationship (Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, 2007; Kasimbazi, 2017). Land tenure systems fundamentally shape how natural resources like water, forests, and minerals are owned, controlled, accessed, used, and managed (Hodgson *et al.*, 2024). Conversely, natural resource tenure also significantly influences land tenure. Where a natural resource, such as water, is essential for land use, particularly for agriculture, the security and availability of water rights can directly impact the value and security of land ownership and usage rights (FAO, 2020; Hodgson *et al.*, 2024). Although the report primarily concentrates on land tenure, it incorporates the interconnectedness with other natural resource tenure systems within the analysis, even if this relationship is not always explicitly emphasized. This is particularly the case when the nexus between land, climate, and people is analysed.

Promoting an ecosystem that integrates formal and complementary data

In view of strengthening the coverage, quality and scope of available data, this report brings together a large number of sources. Mobilizing formal data complementary sources (such as academic or civil society data, among others) not only enhances data availability overall, it also enables better documentation of the complexities and specificities of land tenure. Furthermore, it allows better coverage of the continuum of land rights accessible to peoples and groups across different tenure and governance systems. Finally, the data ecosystem promoted here includes a wide range of participants, from data scientists to community members, giving a voice to all. This is in accordance with the newly adopted Copenhagen Framework on Citizen Data by the Collaborative on Citizen Data (United Nations Statistical Division, 2024) as well as the Human Rights-Based Approach to Data (HRBAD) (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2018).

Structure of the report

The report is structured into seven chapters.

- ***Chapter 1*** (the present chapter) makes the case for and positions the report. It frames and defines the main concepts used and highlights why land rights matter. To set the scene for this series on land tenure and governance, it discusses the evolution of global frameworks governing land tenure from 1945 to the present.
- ***Chapter 2*** assesses the state of land data, which has evolved significantly over the past 15 years, becoming more encompassing but also more complex and fragmented. This chapter unpacks that complexity by outlining the major global initiatives shaping the land data ecosystem, assessing the availability, openness, and completeness of their datasets, as well as analysing how the global land data developments are supporting (or not) SDG reporting processes.
- ***Chapter 3*** explores the global state of land tenure, examining the types and extent of different tenure systems and how they relate to people's sense of security over land. Given the complexities involved in protecting legitimate tenure rights, the chapter combines a broad global analysis with context-specific insights, such as the frequent gap between legal protections and actual practice.
- ***Chapter 4*** examines women's land rights, assessing the status of women's land ownership and tenure security both according to law and in practice, concluding with concrete lessons and policy implications.
- ***Chapter 5*** covers customary land rights. Despite growing recognition of the contributions of customary land rights to climate regulation, biodiversity, and carbon storage, there remains a need for more robust evidence, better understanding, and improved documentation of several key aspects. This chapter seeks to document and complement some of these facts.

- ***Chapter 6*** examines evolving trends in land tenure and the distribution of ownership of agricultural land over the past several decades. It also delves into more recent phenomena of large-scale land acquisitions and the corporatization of land, which further contribute to land concentration.
- Finally, ***Chapter 7*** assesses progress in the land policy sphere and its implementation after over a decade of international guidance on responsible land and tenure governance. It presents some future pathways toward responsible land governance.

What are land tenure and governance?

Land tenure

Tenure systems are social contracts that define how individuals and groups access, use, and control land and related natural resources. Like any contract, these can vary greatly. They could be spoken agreements or customary arrangements that have been in place for generations, or they could be extensive legal documents resulting from intense negotiations. However, all of these tenure systems, whether informal (unwritten) or formal (written), are rules that specify who can use the land, for how long, and under what conditions (FAO, 2012).

Individuals or groups can hold various types of rights over particular pieces of land: the right to use, extract resources, control who can access, or transfer land to others (von Benda-Beckmann, von Benda-Beckmann, and Wiber, 2006; Hasanbasri *et al.*, 2023). These rights don't always come as a single package. Instead, they exist in different combinations depending on the land tenure system in place (Schlager and Ostrom, 1992).

In short, land rights can be understood as a "bundle of rights", existing as a continuum or a spectrum rather than a discrete, all-or-nothing dichotomy (Barry and Augustinus, 2016). These rights "may overlap, complement, reinforce, or even conflict with one another" (Behr *et al.*, 2023, p. 1), and how they are accorded varies across different legal, customary, or institutional contexts.

Each bundle of land rights is shaped through webs of power (Ribot and Peluso, 2003). Distinguishing access from property is particularly relevant in this regard, as some individuals and groups have effective control over land, while others – such as women in customary systems whose rights are bestowed upon them by men who control and have ownership of land – only have access through those in control.

Access, defined as "the ability to derive benefits from things", is a broadening of property's classical definition as "the right to benefit from things", with both, in varying degrees, akin to "a bundle of powers" and a "bundle of rights" (Ribot and Peluso, 2003, p. 153).

Tenure security means that rights to access or control land are recognized by others and protected in cases of specific challenges (FAO, 2002). A transparent and socially legitimate system of land governance should ensure that tenure rights holders have their rights recognized and protected, whether through law or custom.

Land governance

Land governance includes:

- how rights and rules over land are established;
- how they are implemented and enforced;
- how competing interests in land are managed;
- how governments are accountable to their citizens;
- how stakeholders exert power relations over land;
- how citizens participate in decision-making; and
- how they can bring their claims to justice.

Responsible land governance has a dual role. It recognizes and safeguards legitimate tenure rights holders from dispossession by providing access to justice and preventing disputes and conflicts. However, it goes beyond the recognition and safeguarding of current rights to encompass restitutive and redistributive measures that realize new rights to land claimed by vulnerable beneficiaries and disadvantaged groups. As such, land governance can also address historic land inequalities (Box 1.1).

Box 1.1

General principles of land governance

The Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries, and Forests (VGGT), endorsed in 2012 by the Committee on World Food Security, established the following General Principles for state and non-state actors (FAO, 2012).

States should:

- ***Recognize and respect all legitimate tenure right holders and their rights.*** They should take reasonable measures to identify, record, and respect legitimate tenure right holders and their rights, whether formally recorded or not; to refrain from infringement of the tenure rights of others; and to meet the duties associated with tenure rights.
- ***Safeguard legitimate tenure rights against threats and infringements.*** They should protect tenure right holders against the arbitrary loss of their tenure rights, including forced evictions that are inconsistent with their existing obligations under national and international law (see Table 1.1 on legitimate tenure rights).
- ***Promote and facilitate the enjoyment of legitimate tenure rights.*** They should take active measures to promote and facilitate the full realization of tenure rights or the making of transactions with the rights, such as ensuring that services are accessible to all.
- ***Provide access to justice to deal with infringements of legitimate tenure rights.*** They should provide effective and accessible means to everyone, through judicial authorities or other approaches, to resolve disputes over tenure rights; and to provide affordable and prompt enforcement of outcomes. States should provide prompt, just compensation where tenure rights are taken for public purposes.
- ***Prevent tenure disputes, violent conflicts, and corruption.*** They should take active measures to prevent tenure disputes from arising and from escalating into violent conflicts. They should endeavour to prevent corruption in all forms, at all levels, and in all settings. Tenure rights gain legal legitimacy when formally recognized and protected by a state's laws, while social legitimacy stems from broad community acceptance and adherence to social norms, even without formal legal backing (Figure A). In practice, rights can exist with varying degrees of both.

Figure A. Tenure Rights: Legal and social legitimacy

Types of legitimacy	Illustrative examples
Legal legitimacy (legitimized through law; legally recognized)	Private ownership or other tenure rights recognized by law Use rights recognized by law, including leases, cooperatives, concessions, rental or sharecropping agreements, easements, legally recognized customary rights
Social legitimacy (legitimate through broad social acceptance even in absence of legal recognition)	Land rights based on customary or Indigenous tenure systems which lack legal recognition or recordation in official registries Shared forests and rangelands, accessed and used by multiple communities Traditional fishing grounds

Non-state actors, including business enterprises, have a responsibility to respect human rights and legitimate tenure rights. Business enterprises should act with due diligence to avoid infringing on the human rights and legitimate tenure rights of others. They should include appropriate risk management systems to prevent and address adverse impacts on human rights and legitimate tenure rights. Business enterprises should provide for and cooperate in non-judicial mechanisms to provide remedy, including effective operational-level grievance mechanisms where appropriate, when they have caused or contributed to adverse impacts on human rights and legitimate tenure rights. Business enterprises should identify and assess any actual or potential impacts on human rights and legitimate tenure rights in which they may be involved. States, in accordance with their international obligations, should provide access to effective judicial remedies for negative impacts on human rights and legitimate tenure rights by business enterprises. Where transnational corporations are involved, their home states have roles to play in assisting both those corporations and host states to ensure that businesses are not involved in the abuse of human rights and legitimate tenure rights. States should take additional steps to protect against abuses of human rights and legitimate tenure rights by business enterprises that are owned or controlled by the state or that receive substantial support and services from state agencies.

Source: FAO. 2012. Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests in the Context of National Food Security.
https://doi.org/10.4060/i2801e

Land governance is a complex and often disputed system of rules and decision-making, influenced by both domestic and international forces. These influences can be grouped into four main interconnected categories of pressure (Table 1.1).

Table 1.1. Influences on land governance

Commercial Pressures	Political Pressures (vertical social pressures)
These pressures arise from the increasing demand for land for commercial purposes, such as agriculture, mining, and real estate development. This includes the expansion of large-scale farming, infrastructure projects, and the rising value of land for residential and commercial development.	Political factors, including government policies and the influence of powerful actors, can significantly impact land governance. These pressures may be driven by government decisions to grant concessions over large or valuable areas of land, the influence of political elites, and the allocation of resources for development projects.
Social Pressures (horizontal social pressures)	**Environmental Pressures**
Social pressures on land arise from demographic changes, including population growth and urbanization, as well as from the increasing demand for land for housing, infrastructure, and other social needs. These pressures can also be linked to social inequalities, such as the dispossession of communities living in conditions of marginalization and the unequal access to land and resources.	Environmental factors, such as climate change, land degradation, and the need for conservation, also contribute to challenges in land governance. These pressures may include the loss of agricultural land due to soil erosion, the impact of deforestation on biodiversity, and the need for sustainable land management practices and new technologies. Additionally, they relate to climate-related interventions and renewable energy initiatives.

Source: Authors' own elaboration based on Sunderlin, W.D. & Holland, M.B. 2022. A Historical Perspective on Land Tenure Security. In: M.B. Holland, Y.J. Masuda & B.E. Robinson, eds. *Land Tenure Security and Sustainable Development*. pp. 15–41. Cham, Springer International Publishing. ***https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-81881-4_2***

The interaction between these pressures significantly impacts how land is used, whether for agriculture, urbanization, conservation, or other purposes. It also influences how land is managed, whether through formal legal systems or informal practices, and how access to land resources is distributed, potentially leading to conflicts or inequalities. Ultimately, the interplay of these forces has broad consequences for economic development, social justice, and the environment.

Why land tenure and governance matter

Land tenure is explicitly highlighted as crucial to SDGs 1 (No poverty), 2 (Zero hunger), and 5 (Gender equality), and is also fundamental to SDGs 10 (Reduced inequalities), 11 (Sustainable cities and communities), 13 (Climate action), 15 (Life on land), and 16 (Peaceful and inclusive societies). Moreover, connections between land rights, gender equality, climate impacts, agricultural productivity, food security, and rural well-being give land rights and governance a pivotal role in achieving numerous other SDGs (Gao and Bryan, 2017; Nchanji *et al.*, 2023).

What does the literature say about the nexus between secure tenure rights and food security, sustainable development, livelihoods, and the environment? While more research is needed to cover different regions and tenure systems (Childress, Choudhury and Sanjak, 2022), findings so far show a complex and nuanced picture. Broadly speaking, secure tenure rights have positive effects on these dimensions. However, simply granting secure land rights may have limited impact if not supported by broader economic and policy measures. In addition, the benefits of tenure security and the recognition of rights can be unequally distributed across population groups and within households. The following elements are particularly relevant in this regard:

1 ***Tenure rights, food security and livelihoods.*** Secure tenure rights have been identified as a key factor motivating small-scale producers to invest in their land. This security encourages them to cultivate crops and raise livestock for personal consumption, while also enabling the generation of agricultural surpluses that are crucial for covering basic non-food expenses. (Holden and Ghebru, 2016; Ajefu and Abiona, 2020; Stevens *et al.*, 2020). As such, tenure security is associated with increased household food consumption, dietary diversity, private investment, and productivity (Keefer and Knack, 2002; Fort, 2007; Lawry *et al.*, 2017; Ekesa *et al.*, 2020; Stevens *et al.*, 2020).

The link between tenure rights, food security, and development is mainly ascribed to the assurance acquired through securing land ownership. On the one hand, tenure security motivates farmers to invest in land and assures them that they will be able to reap the fruits of their investments (Deininger, Ali and Alemu, 2011; Linkow, 2016; Lovo, 2016). On the other hand, certified land rights act as collateral for accessing credit and insurance against natural and economic shocks, and hence serve as a driver of investments (Sossou and Mbaye, 2018; Ajefu and Abiona, 2020; Fan and Rue, 2020) and diversification into the non-farm economy (Hazell, 2020).

Notwithstanding the findings above, the literature warns that causal relationships are complex to track (Lawry *et al.*, 2017) and are often grounded in localized geographical and historical contexts that influence outcomes (Pritchard, Rammohan and Sekher, 2017). For instance, research has cautioned about the positive effects of land titling on agricultural productivity, particularly in cases where credit markets are not developed (Migot-Adholla, Place and Oluoch-Kosura, 1994; Pinckney and Kimuyu, 1994) and in the absence of broader agricultural policies (De la O Campos, Edouard and Salvago, 2023). Ibrahim, Hendriks and Schönfeldt (2023) found high variability in several food security outcomes and indicators when assessed against different modes of land rights documentation and acquisition. More complex models of interaction between tenure security and food security argue that household choices (consumption, investment, production, and exchange) are driven by endogenous factors (such as land, other natural resources, labour, and capital) and exogenous parameters, leading to variable trade-offs (Maxwell and Wiebe, 1999). Ultimately, assets and wealth based on land and natural resources play a critical role (ILC, FAO and GLTN, 2021). Under conditions of severe food, climate, and economic crises, titling can become a driver of dispossession when rights holders default on loans and lenders take over mortgaged land, or when farmers are forced into distress sales (Green and Bylander, 2021).

2 ***Tenure rights and the environment.*** Land tenure and governance can play a fundamental role in not only increasing productivity but also in maintaining and restoring ecosystems. Evidence indicates that tenure reforms can generate beneficial effects for sustainability and climate change adaptation and mitigation (Rampa, Gadanakis, and Rose, 2020). Studies – including Holden and Ghebru (2016); Rampa, Gadanakis and Rose (2020) and Murken and Gornott (2022) – show a positive relationship between tenure security and the adoption of mitigation and adaptation practices. Moreover, adopting adaptation and mitigation strategies can combat tenure insecurity and improve ecosystem services, attract climate finance, and generate carbon credits (Colls and Ikkala, 2009; Lawler *et al.*, 2013; Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [IPCC], 2022).

At the household level, farmers' vulnerability to climate-related hazards increases with tenure insecurity, particularly in the context of natural disasters and relocation (IPCC, 2019; UN-Habitat, Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology University, and GLTN, 2019). At a broader collective level, there is also strong evidence that customary ownership of forests, especially by Indigenous Peoples, and other customary communities (See Box 3.1 for terminological clarification), is associated with promotion of traditional knowledge and practices, reduced deforestation, better conservation of forest products, and greater protection of carbon storage and livelihood benefits (IPCC, 2019; FAO and FILAC, 2021; Sander *et al.*, 2025). Chapter 5 of this report explores these aspects further.

Yet the same findings warn that the role of tenure security as an incentive or disincentive for farmers to invest in adaptation and mitigation measures is complex. Results show extreme variability depending on how tenure security is defined, the type of tenure system involved, the strength of local institutions associated with it, and the intensity of climate events. The evidence reinforces the complexity and difficulty of assessing and measuring causal-effect links (Murken and Gornott, 2022). Farmers' decisions to adapt or cope with climate change are not always positively influenced by increased tenure security (whether formally or informally defined) and depend on the specific adaptation strategy. Moreover, longer-term investments, such as agroforestry or soil conservation, are positively influenced by tenure security, although tenure security is often simplistically equated with ownership.

3 ***Land rights, peace, stability and security.*** Secure tenure rights can be decisive for avoiding conflicts over land through better delineation of rights and avoidance of grievances. They also contribute to conflict resolution, democratic processes, and the realization of associated human rights. Specific evidence shows that having tenure security reduces the occurrence of conflict between households (Di Falco *et al.*, 2020), whereas land demarcation and registration contribute to reducing long-standing intra- and inter-territorial conflicts (World Bank, 2017). This is particularly the case with territories used by Indigenous Peoples, and other customary communities, enabling them to gain direct control over natural resources. In post-conflict situations, such as in Liberia and Rwanda (Byamugisha, 2016), Colombia (Barthel *et al.*, 2016), Bosnia and Herzegovina (Stevens *et al.*, 2020), and many others, early interventions in reforming land tenure prevented the recurrence of conflicts associated with land. These interventions generated peace dividends while improving social harmony and cohesion, and political reconciliation (Lesorogol, 2005; Byamugisha, 2016).

However, evidence also shows that simply recognizing and protecting the land rights of vulnerable groups can be ineffective. According to Sawyer and Gomez (2012), for example, despite the number of international frameworks and national laws across the world protecting the rights of Indigenous Peoples, the majority of Indigenous Peoples find themselves increasingly subjected to discrimination, exploitation, and dispossession. As Meuller (2022) notes, based on his work in Brazil, the demarcation of Indigenous Peoples' land and property rights only guarantees some measure of protection as it allows them and their allies to use the laws and the courts to demand that their rights be respected. This is echoed by Madrigal Correa, Cuesta Leiva and Somerville (2024), who find that while the recognition and certification of Indigenous Peoples' land in the Philippines can lead to a reduction of conflict, the bureaucratic process of obtaining certificates and the lack of necessary financial resources can result in delays trigger and increase violence.

4 ***Tenure rights and resilient, inclusive, and equal prosperity and empowerment.*** Evidence shows that secure land tenure protects and empowers all, especially those living in conditions of vulnerability, and lays the foundations for gender equality and intergenerational justice (FAO, 2023, 2025). Research indicates that formal and informal land tenure rights are positively correlated with identity, the ability to maintain social relations, and the capacity to establish a homestead (Cousins *et al.*, 2018), as these rights are embedded within social and cultural frameworks that connect individuals to their communities and place, offering a sense of belonging and security. They can provide more assurance for vulnerable groups, especially women and girls, who disproportionately suffer evictions and disinheritance (Payne and Durand-Lasserve, 2012). A strong relationship exists between women's land rights and women's societal representation and decision-making power (Meinzen-Dick *et al.*, 2017). This relationship is particularly evident with regard to household matters (Stanley and Lisher, 2023), production (allowing women to decide which crops to grow on the lands under their control [UN, 2013]), and consumption (Doss, 2006), as well as on human capital investment and intergenerational transfers (Deininger, Jin and Yadav, 2011). Women with strong land rights have more opportunities and are more likely to work off-farm, earn up to four times more (USAID, 2016), and are more likely to have individual savings and take out loans (+35 percent and +12 percent respectively [USAID, 2016]). Tenure security also offers more prospects for youth, as it is associated with young people increasing their investment and involvement in land-based activities such as farming, thereby reducing their likelihood of migrating (De Brauw, 2019; Yeboah *et al.*, 2020; FAO, 2025). In addition, tenure security, particularly for inhabitants of informal settlements or persons with low-income housing, can positively contribute to household welfare, social integration, and access to basic services (*Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit*, 2016).

A caveat to the above is observed in the research on the links between the formalization of tenure rights and dispossession. Research on the formalization of individual land titles in customary systems has revealed possible losses of rights described as "derived" or "secondary" (Tsikata, 2016, p.11). Singirankabo and Ertsen (2020) found that the formalization of individual land titles can reinforce existing gendered land inequalities to the detriment of overall developmental outcomes. Related dynamics have occurred in land reforms that allocated plots to male heads of households and cut off women's secondary rights (Jacobs, 2013) or in individualization schemes in community lands of Indigenous Peoples in Cambodia (Park and Maffii, 2017). Similarly, an attempt to secure land rights of labour tenants residing on farms has led to displacement and evictions, both legal and illegal, of large numbers of farm workers. The situation has also led to worsening working conditions (Social Surveys Africa and Nkuzi Development Association, 2005; Cowling, Hornby and Oettlé, 2017; Presidential Advisory Panel on Land Reform and Agriculture, 2019).

5 ***Land and overall economic development and structural change.*** Economic literature shows that land tenure security is a critical component of comprehensive rural development strategies, alongside infrastructure development, access to education and skills training, and the creation of off-farm employment opportunities. These findings are corroborated by country and comparative studies of developmental breakthroughs in East Asia, including Taiwan Province of China, the Republic of Korea and Japan's industrial rebirth after the Second World War. They are also supported by evidence of growth successes in China, some Indian states, and Viet Nam during the 1970s and 1980s. High agricultural income, consumption, investments, and employment elasticities were identified following land redistribution and tenure security in favour of millions of landless and tenant farmers. These effects were seen when reforms were coupled with wider agricultural policies and services (Johnston and Mellor, 1961; Johnston and Kilby, 1975; Timmer, 1988; Haggblade, Hazell and Reardon, 2007; Hazell *et al.*, 2010). Mellor (2017) shows that land tenure reforms can set the basis for greater incomes for the poorer sections of the rural population. These incomes were then spent in high proportions on the non-farm sector, creating larger domestic and local markets for manufacturing goods and facilitating the expansion of the manufacturing sector. Recent studies on land reforms have also shown increased economic dynamism of small farmers across downstream and upstream linkages, contributing to the revitalization of rural towns via labour-intensive, although often informal, local markets and non-farm agrifood businesses (Scoones and Murimbarimba, 2021). In Taiwan Province of China and the Republic of Korea, increased incomes among poor farmers also facilitated household investment in the schooling of children, subsequently leading to the availability of a skilled workforce that eased absorption in secondary and tertiary sectors (Losch *et al.*, 2012) and strengthened export-oriented industrialization. Finally, more egalitarian land distribution appeased poor farmers' struggles for land, providing a stable political environment that allowed the governments to focus on strengthened socioeconomic development (Ban, Mun and Perkins, 1980; Putzel and Manila, 1993; Studwell, 2013).

In comparison, countries that failed to successfully implement land redistribution policies have witnessed limited structural transformation and/or middle-income traps and are still struggling with vast pockets of poverty and food insecurity (Putzel and Manila, 1993; Kay, 2002; Lipton, 2009; Studwell, 2013). Other evidence suggests that unequal land distribution patterns affect prospects for growth in developing countries (Deininger and Squire, 1998), for instance, by slowing the capital accumulation necessary for structural change (Easterly, 2007; Studwell, 2013) and hindering human capital formation (Galor, Moav and Vollrath, 2002; Baten and Hippe, 2018).

A brief history of land tenure and governance, 1945–present

The history of land tenure and governance is, in many ways, the history of human civilization and is far too broad for this report to cover. However, arising from the new global consensus following the Second World War, increased recognition of the transformative power of land tenure and governance in tackling poverty and enhancing security led to the importance of numerous significant global regulatory frameworks and agreements (Figure 1.1; for a more comprehensive summary, see Appendix 1).

Towards nation building and self-determination (1945–1980)

The post-1945 land governance framework was shaped by a complex interplay of factors, including, but not limited to, the decline of European colonial powers, the rise of national movements in colonized territories, post-Second World War reconstruction in Europe, the Cold War geopolitical divides, and the emergence of international organizations such as the United Nations (UN) (Box 1.2).

Box 1.2

The creation of FAO, its Land Affairs Service and the VGGT in support of agrarian reform

In 1945, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) was created with the mandate to ensure food security against the threat of famine due to disrupted supply chains. One of the main goals was to support agrarian reform for greater productivity. In 1947, a Land Affairs Service was established within the FAO, which is still active today, albeit in a different format. Numerous other resolutions, conventions, and charters followed, all underscoring the rights of ownership and possession of various population groups and the significance of agrarian reform in achieving this (Monsalve Suárez [2008]; also see Appendix 1).

The Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests in the Context of National Food Security (VGGT), ratified by all members of the Committee on World Food Security (CFS) in 2012, represents the main sectoral framework (also see Box 1.1).

The VGGT resulted from a three-year inclusive process building on the Voluntary Guidelines to Support the Progressive Realization of the Right to Adequate Food in the Context of National Food Security (Right to Food Guidelines), which were adopted by the FAO Council in November 2004, and the 2006 International Conference on Agrarian Reform and Rural

Development (ICARRD). The Guidelines call for states and corporations to respect human rights and uphold law and policy governing access to land. In addition, it establishes the right to participation of all, in particular peasants, Indigenous Peoples, women and other rural workers.

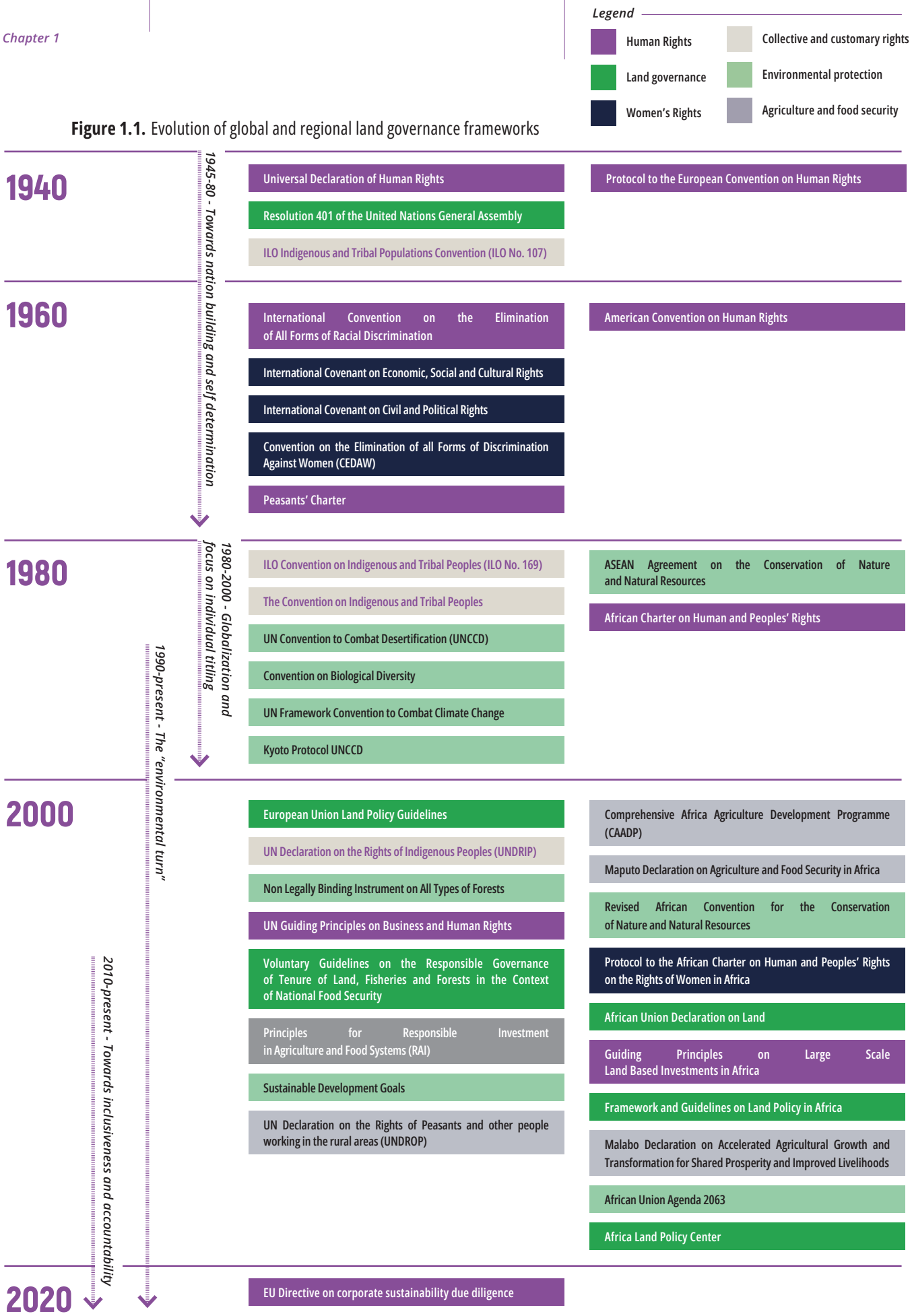
Source: Monsalve Suárez, S. 2008. The FAO and Its Work on Land Policy and Agrarian Reform. ***https://reliefweb.int/report/world/fao-and-its-work-land-policy-and-agrarian-reform***; FAO. 2012. *Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests in the Context of National Food Security*. First revision. Rome.

From 1945 to the 1980s, these national liberation movements, decolonization processes and reconstruction efforts translated into widespread, comprehensive reform programs to support nation-building in a new era. The frameworks, focuses and orientation were not uniform, but land reform – although diverse and undergoing major changes – was instrumental in this process in many cases (Pierri, Anseeuw and Campolina, 2025).

While Eastern European countries and China initially adopted Soviet-inspired models of state economic planning and collective agriculture (Merl, 2021), other countries developed distinct approaches, such as the United Republic of Tanzania under Nyerere, which combined small-scale agriculture through 'villagization' with large-scale mechanized production under parastatals (Metz, 1982; Shivji, 1998).

Other examples were structured around market economies and private ownership of family farms, with the aim of promoting stability and development (Tuma, 1965). This was guided by the UN, and in particular by Article 17 of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which affirmed that everyone, whether alone or in community with others, has the right to own property and that no one may be arbitrarily deprived of it. In the 1950s, this materialized in the form of land redistribution, complemented by measures supporting community development and institutional and rural self-help systems (Tuma, 1965). In the 1960s and 1970s, the emphasis shifted to agricultural productivity and economic development through land consolidation, the promotion of new technologies, cooperation, and integrated approaches combining productive activities with improvements in social and physical infrastructure (Overseas Development Institute, 1979). The apex of this nation-building land reformism was reached in 1979 with the FAO World Conference on Agrarian Reform and Rural Development (WCARRD), which led to the adoption of the Declaration of Principles and the Programme of Action on Agrarian Reform and Rural Development (the Peasants' Charter). The aim of the Peasants' Charter was not only to support agrarian reforms to improve productivity and economic performance but also to align them with respect for human rights and the right to food. The Charter expressly states that the poorest rural populations have a right of access to land and stresses that economic growth is necessary but not sufficient.

Figure 1.1. Evolution of global and regional land governance frameworks



Source: Authors' own elaboration.

Globalization and the focus on individual titling (1980–2000)

Around the 1980s, the Bretton Woods system and the Washington Consensus fast-tracked a large-scale trend of privatization programmes, which globalization further accelerated. International donor agencies and governments modified their objectives of nation-building to that of strengthening land markets and privatizing property rights, arguing that private ownership of agricultural land facilitates investment, economic development, and poverty reduction. Improved agricultural production and land markets, it was reasoned, would eventually result in the efficient allocation of land resources among producers, including smallholders. Land redistribution programmes transformed into what was referred to as market-assisted land reform. To create or activate such markets, numerous projects and programmes to title and register land rights were embarked upon, often accompanied by legislation to regularize private land rights or extend individual private property rights to previously public, state, or customary land.

The "environmental turn" (1990–present)

The 1990s were marked by a growing awareness of the need to address global environmental concerns, as demonstrated in the Rio Conventions (1992) and the Kyoto Protocol (1997). Although land and, more particularly, "the commons" (Ostrom, 1990) have been part of the environmental discourse and related actions, more recently, efforts around addressing biodiversity loss, desertification, and climate change have recognized and institutionalized the centrality of land tenure issues. Illustrative of this is Decision 26 at the Conference of Parties (COP) 14 of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) in 2019, which adopted the integration of the VGGT into UNCCD programming and land degradation neutrality (LDN) implementation. In 2024, at COP16 of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), an indicator on land tenure and land use change in Indigenous territories was adopted as a headline indicator for Target 22 on Traditional Knowledge, thus institutionalizing land tenure in its reporting mechanism and overall strategy.

Towards inclusiveness and accountability (2005–present)

Recent years have been characterized by enhanced inclusiveness and accountability, with the establishment of universal frameworks of minimum standards promoting, cultural rights and identity, rights to education, health, employment, and language, through the adoption of instruments such as the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas (UNDROP). These instruments prohibit discrimination and promote full and effective participation in decision-making and policy processes.

For the land sector, the VGGT, which represent the main sectoral framework (see also Box 1.1), resulted from a three-year inclusive process and were ratified by all members of the Committee on World Food Security (CFS) in 2012. They call for states and corporations to respect human rights and uphold laws and policies governing access to land. In addition, the VGGT establish the right to participation for all, in particular peasants, Indigenous Peoples, women, and other rural workers.

Other frameworks require states and non-state actors to recognize and respect all legitimate tenure rights holders and their rights, and to provide safeguards against threats and infringements. Among these instruments are the 2011 UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights; the 2014 Principles for Responsible Investment in Agriculture and Food Systems; and the 2024 European Union Directive on Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence.

The evolving nature of land policies

From this brief history of post-Second World War policies and frameworks, three major trends have emerged:

- upscaling and mainstreaming land as key to inclusive and sustainable development;
- increased recognition of collective land rights; and
- growing international consensus on soft law and principles.

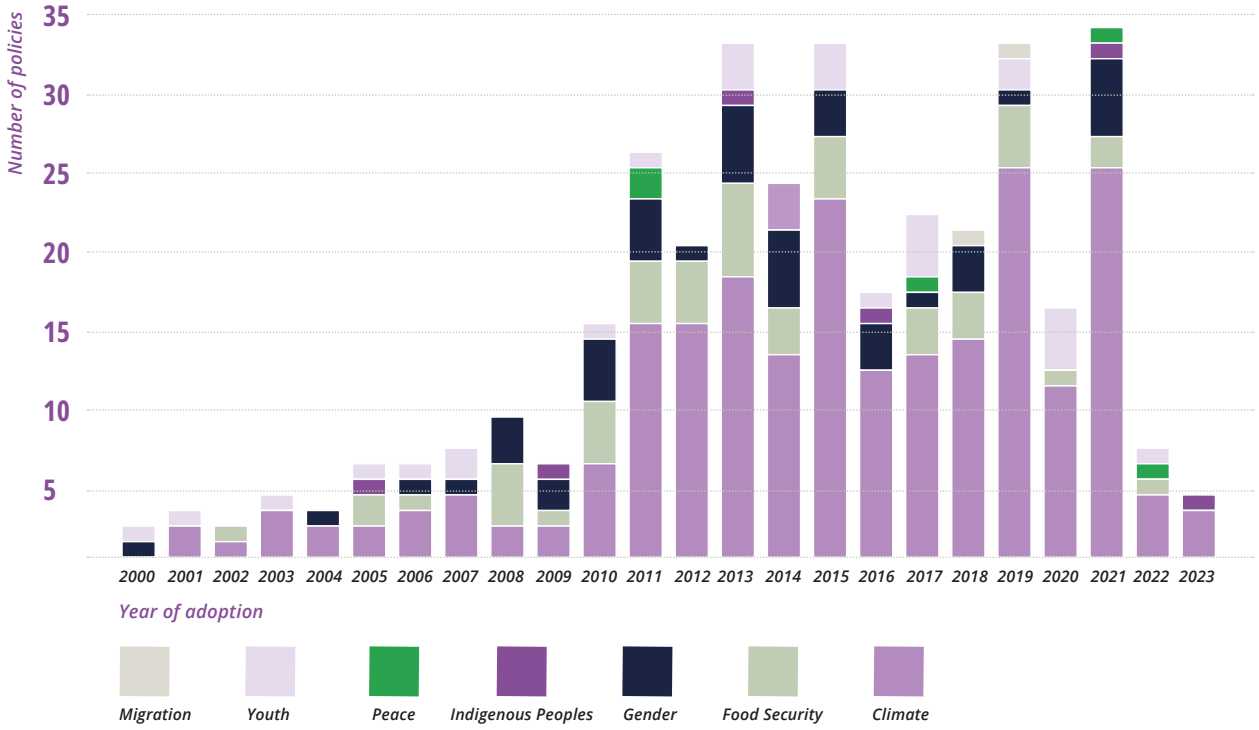
Upscaling and mainstreaming land as key to inclusive and sustainable development

Land is recognized as key to inclusive and sustainable development in the multilateral developmental discourse, as is clearly shown by the inclusion of land tenure indicators in the SDGs and CBD's Global Biodiversity Framework.

Tenure security is recognized as enabling people to invest and prosper, to protect nature, and to plan for the future. It is also seen as critical for shelter and housing, for livelihoods and investment, for social security and resilience, and for sustainable natural resource management. Conversely, without secure rights and tenure security, individuals, communities, and businesses cannot use land productively and sustainably. Tenure security and property rights underpin open societies, gender justice, and inclusive markets.

This recognition has led to an increase in land-related actions over the last two decades in policies related to climate, gender, food security, labour and employment, as well as in migration, peace, youth, and Indigenous Peoples. In 2021, for example, aspects related to land tenure and governance were included in 35 national policies, including 25 in climate-related policies and six in gender policies (Figure 1.2).

Figure 1.2. National sectoral policies integrating land tenure dimensions (2000–2021)



Note: This analysis is based on an assessment of documents from the FAOLEX database on legislation, policies, and bilateral agreements regarding food, agriculture, and natural resource management. From the exhaustive list of keywords identifying the themes covered in each document, 39 keywords related to land tenure and governance were used to identify 443 policy documents from 143 countries for the 2000–2021 period. These documents were then classified according to their sectors, where land governance and management were recognized as relevant issues. The reliability and scope of this analysis are limited to the availability of relevant documents on FAOLEX, which is not a comprehensive source of all legal and policy documentation worldwide, and to the quality and reliability of the filtration process. This figure provides an overview of land governance themes covered in other sectoral policies, while trends in the adoption of land governance laws and policies are discussed in later sections.

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

Increased recognition of customary land rights

While land policy recommendations for most of the twentieth century generally focused on the promotion of individual titling or state properties, since the 1990s, reforms have increasingly legally recognized customary property systems. In the process, what was conventionally defined as property in land is loosening its singular focus on the discrete individual and commoditized parcel to capture the complex social dynamics that govern land tenure.

According to Alden Wily (2018), these reforms arise from a growing acceptance by national governments of community land claims. This shift follows the recognition that absolute private property rights or state institutions are often unsuitable for managing shared resources in certain contexts, combined with increasing demands for more local and devolved governance. As part of the environmental turn, this momentum has grown with increasing recognition of the value of customary land ownership, particularly for sustainable resource management, climate action, and biodiversity conservation. Evidence shows that when Indigenous Peoples, and other customary communities have secure and enforceable rights to their lands, deforestation drops, biodiversity improves, greenhouse gas emissions also decline, and livelihoods are strengthened – often more effectively than under government or private management (FAO and FILAC, 2021; Sander *et al.*, 2025).

A review of land legislation in 100 countries rolled out in 2018 finds that 73 of the 100 state laws analysed provided for community-based landholding as a lawful form of property (Alden Wily, 2018). Fifty of these 73 laws – 68 percent – indicate that community and private or corporate property are equally protected in the eyes of the law. As such, many countries acknowledge community property on the basis of state-created land collectives, cooperatives, and unions, such as in Kyrgyzstan, Mongolia, Armenia, Algeria, Cuba, and China. In other countries, arrangements have transformed into sophisticated legal entities, for example, in Germany, Austria, Switzerland, and Sweden. Spain and Portugal have revived collective tenure for forests and pastures to aid conservation.

Not all laws providing for customary property cover the same resources. Some provide recognition only for shared off-farm pastures and forests. Others enable communities to become the formal, registered owners of the entire area of their traditional domains, including root title to family farms. Conditions also vary for different categories of community owners. For example, communities that define themselves as Indigenous Peoples often enjoy different rights to collective resources than those available to other communities. They are also more protected by international frameworks that require their free, informed, and prior consent ahead of the acquisition and use of their lands (Rights and Resources Initiative [RRI] and Tenure Facility, 2021).

Growing international consensus on soft law and principles

Soft law is an integral part of the international legal system, and it is often generated through the UN. Soft law has a range of political and legal effects, and it interacts with, or is a precursor to, one or more of the traditional sources of law ("hard law"). The VGGT and the Principles for Responsible Agricultural Investment (RAI) – both soft law instruments, although grounded in binding human rights obligations (Box 1.3) – do not replace existing national or international laws, commitments, treaties, or agreements. Nor do they limit or undermine any legal obligations that states may have under international law.

For some, the nature of such non-coercive mechanisms has been criticized as too weak and ineffective (Myers and Sanjak, 2022). For others, despite possessing no legal force, voluntary instruments such as the VGGT are often followed and can have far-reaching impacts. For them, soft law has a number of significant advantages, making it particularly suited to land governance, as follows:

- Soft law facilitates compromise among different actors (Jansen, 2020). The non-binding nature of soft law allows for a lower hurdle to reach an agreement that is acceptable to states on aspects that are cross-boundary (such as climate) or very sensitive (such as land).
- Broad endorsement shapes the expectation that all members are bound by the underlying obligation.
- Soft law provides an internationally recognized set of principles and good practices. States and other actors may adopt soft law provisions to elaborate on the provisions of existing hard law. As Cotula (2017) stresses, while the VGGT are a voluntary instrument and do not create legal obligations, they do inform the interpretation of international treaties and the development of national laws. For example, the VGGT were instrumental in the adoption of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas (UNDROP) by the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) and the UN General Assembly (UNGA) in 2018, among others. As such, over time, the international consensus embodied in the VGGT can provide the foundation for the development of legally binding norms (Cotula and Knight, 2021).
- As Jansen (2020) puts it, compared to international treaties, soft law instruments involve a different "theory of change" that promotes reform through multi-stakeholder dialogue, political consensus, and international good practice. It needs to be noted, however, that this view has been criticized by some civil society groups with the argument that 'multi-stakeholderism' "mixes up the roles of states and companies, entrusting businesses to 'resolve land conflicts' instead of states, as duty-bearers, to realize and protect tenure rights and to regulate and monitor investors" (Hall, Scoones and Henley, 2016, p. 41).
- Generally, it can be concluded that soft-law instruments such as the VGGT provide procedural safeguards to ensure that all legitimate land rights are properly identified, included, and protected. They tend to promote inclusive processes that recognize the social, cultural, economic, and environmental value of land, as well as the interconnected use of resources (Cotula and Knight, 2021).

- The guidelines stress non-discrimination, awareness of power imbalances, and the need for "active, free, effective, meaningful, and informed" participation (FAO, 2012, p. 5). Particular attention is given to safeguarding the tenure rights of groups living in conditions of vulnerability, often overlooked in national laws.

For that reason, as illustrated by human rights provisions (Box 1.3), although the soft law nature of the land governance framework is not binding, it is anchored in binding principles making human rights enforceable on the basis of numerous recognized global principles.

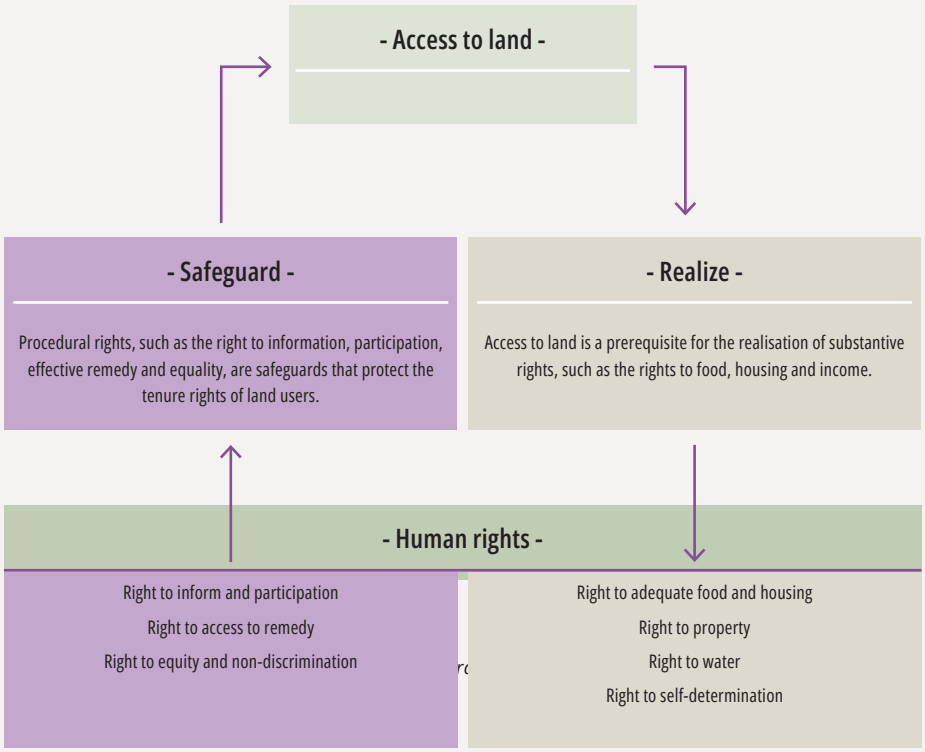
Box 1.3

Land and human rights

Land and human rights are deeply intertwined, as land access is crucial for livelihood, food security, housing, and overall well-being. While there is no universally recognized "right to land" in international human rights law, the right to an adequate standard of living is recognized. The scope of this right covers the right to food, housing, property, water, and self-determination, all embedded in the soft laws and governance frameworks on land rights, including the VGGT. These rights are binding through the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, among others (OHCHR, FAO, UN-Habitat, forthcoming).

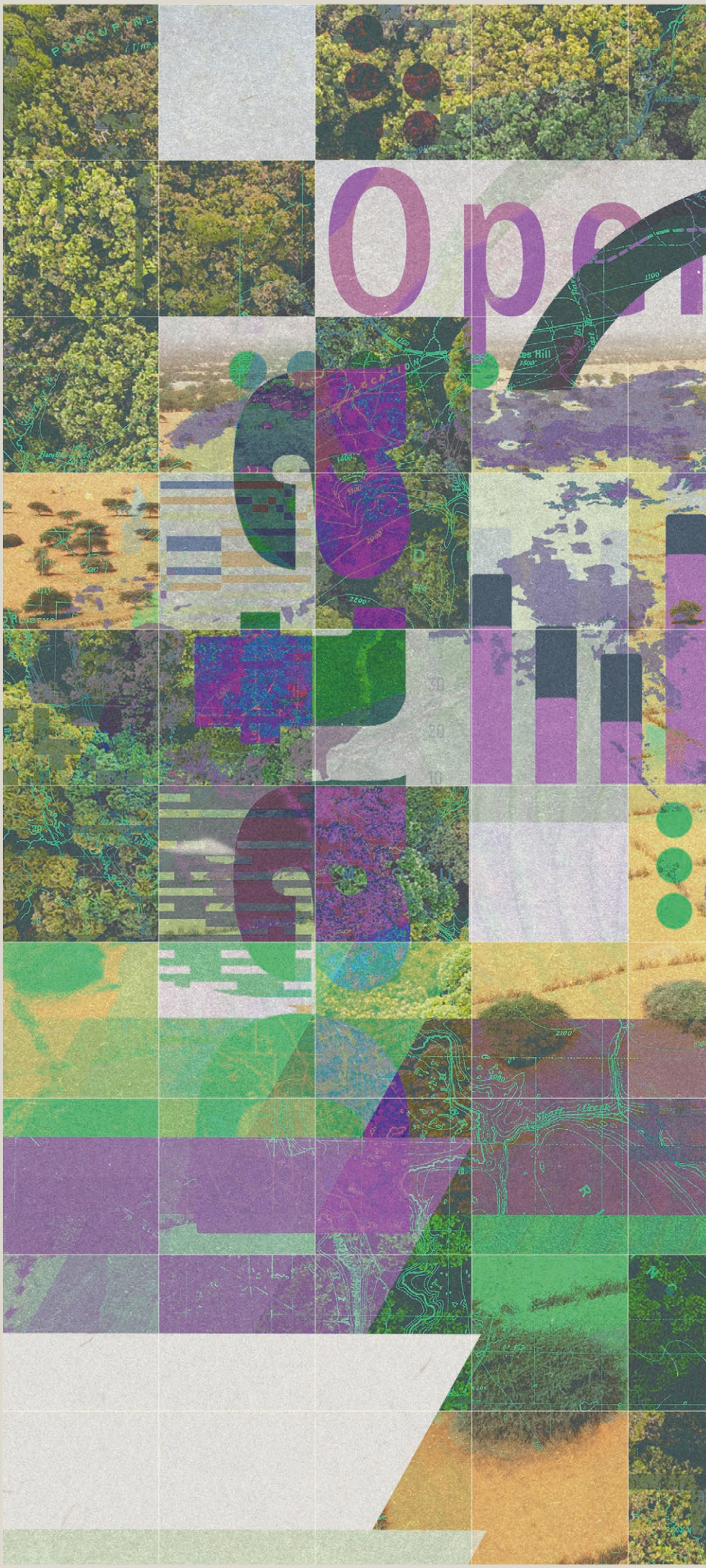
Land is central to the realization of human rights – including those enshrined* in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). The UNDRIP and the UNDROP have recognized land as a self-standing human right for Indigenous Peoples, as well as peasants and other people working in rural areas. The Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women has interpreted CEDAW as protecting the right to land of rural women and Indigenous women and girls. The Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights has interpreted the specific obligations for States parties to the ICESCR as including the duties to respect, protect, and fulfil the access to, use of, and control over land. These duties apply when necessary to guarantee Covenant rights, in particular the rights to food, housing and water, health, cultural participation, and self-determination.

Figure A. Linkages between land rights and human rights



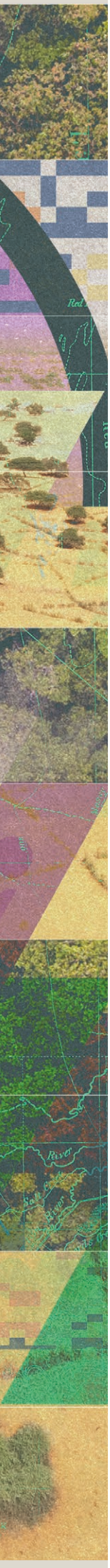
Notes: (*) Enshrine: By ratifying global and regional human rights instruments in which rights are embedded (such as the ICESCR, ICCPR, and CEDAW), governments – as duty bearers – are obliged to protect rights holders against violations by third parties. Duty bearers are also mandated to respect and fulfil human rights and, therefore, must take steps to progressively realize these rights.

Sources: OHCHR, FAO, UN-Habitat (forthcoming). Frequently Asked Questions on Land and Human Rights. Geneva; TMG Research. 2024. Rights4Land: towards an agenda for just land governance. Land Tenure and Climate 2. TMG Research. ***https://assets.ctfassets.net/rrirl83ijjfda/5eIVb9VB1z3g2UaSJj84lJ/e10eb9c4e3e34aff0c754eda0f8b4f45/TMG_Rights4Land_LandTenureAndClimate.pdf***



Transparent and open land data governance strengthens communities, safeguards property rights, and fosters more equitable systems for managing one of society's most vital resources for sustainable development.

Robinson et al., 2024, p. 3



Chapter 2

LAND TENURE AND GOVERNANCE DATA

2

Land data[1] – here broadly defined as information about the status, ownership, value and use of land, as well as its governance and distribution – are a powerful tool for evidence-based decision-making. They also ensure that policies support land rights.

Land tenure and governance data have evolved significantly over the last 15 years. The food price crisis of 2008–2009 and the rush for land that followed led to calls for greater transparency and accountability (Anseeuw and Baldinelli, 2020). The inclusion of several land indicators in the SDGs in 2015 also spurred efforts to measure land tenure and develop globally consistent approaches to data collection (Meggiolaro, Sato and Sorensen, 2018). Although land tenure and governance data collection remain heavily dependent on surveys and censuses, rapid changes in technology (including satellite imagery, blockchain, and artificial intelligence) have led to a surge of data generation. Data are now produced at all levels, from local to global (Robinson *et al.*, unpublished).

While a wide range of initiatives, from state-led and academic to grassroots civil society efforts, have helped strengthen and democratize land data, they have also contributed to a more fragmented and complex landscape. This chapter focuses on unpacking that complexity. The first section outlines the major global initiatives shaping the land data ecosystem, assessing the availability, openness, and completeness of their datasets. The second section turns to the land-related SDGs, analysing how global land data developments are influencing and supporting (or, in some cases, hindering) SDG reporting processes.

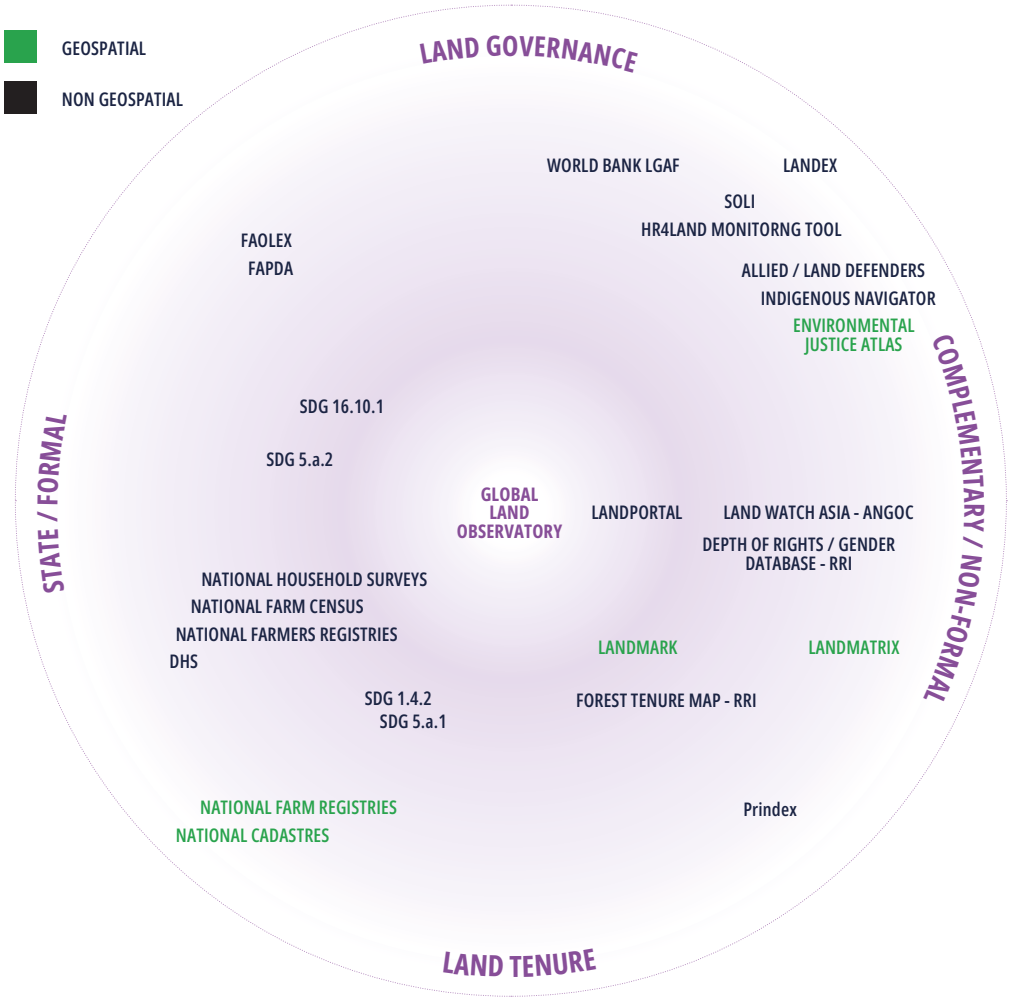
The land tenure and governance data ecosystem

In recent years, improvements in benchmarking and ratification of reporting frameworks have accompanied the refinement of tools to generate and analyse land data (Robinson *et al.*, 2024). Figure 2.1 maps a number of significant currently active data initiatives based on their status (whether they are state/formal projects or complementary/non-formal). It also maps their focus on land governance or land tenure.

These different initiatives vary in geographical scope (local, national, regional and global), type (such as geospatial and quantitative data, among many other types) and methodology (including household surveys, agricultural censuses and community-level participatory mapping).

1 Data here encompass a wide range of quantitative or qualitative standardized information compiled by national statistical offices, as well as other governmental or non-governmental entities, whether at the local, national, regional, or global level (definition adapted from OHCHR, 2018).

Figure 2.1. Mapping the land tenure and governance data ecosystem



Note: The data initiatives covered here focus solely on land tenure and land governance. Biophysical land data, encompassing the physical and biological characteristics of land, including soil, are not included. Additionally, it identifies global-level data initiatives and generalized initiatives at other levels (such as cadasters). While there are several regional- and national-level initiatives that are vital to this data ecosystem and contribute to a number of the global tools mentioned, listing them individually is beyond the scope of this exercise.

Source: Authors' own elaboration. (See Appendix 2 for more detailed breakdown of these initiatives.)

The proliferation of data initiatives has led, at least partly, to a democratization of data collection and access. The present, more open data landscape draws on official government sources (including agricultural censuses and farm registries) and citizen- and community-led processes (such as the International Land Coalition's LANDex). Research and innovation (particularly geospatial and digital technologies) have contributed to this diversification. Democratic data is also broader data. With more groups and initiatives selecting their focus and refining methodologies, insights are gained into a wider range of themes, including women's land rights, land inequality and concentration, and violence against land and its defenders. The case of land data for and by Indigenous Peoples illustrates this point (Box 2.1).

Box 2.1

Land data for and by Indigenous Peoples

The need for open and accessible land data for addressing Indigenous Peoples' land rights is often in tension with their data sovereignty. While recognizing the diverse histories and experiences of Indigenous Peoples around the world, there are shared experiences of data dispossession and extraction, both historical and current (Cormack and Kukutai, 2022).

Yet land data governance has broad relevance for equity-seeking populations and is especially critical in challenging the ongoing data colonialism faced by Indigenous Peoples worldwide (Cocq, 2022). In this sense, Indigenous Peoples' data sovereignty and data governance should go hand in hand with the digitization of land administration functions and services (Raine, Rodriguez-Lonebear and Martinez, 2017).

One example of creating an agreed framework to address the lack of registration and titling of Indigenous-held land was developed by First Nations communities in Canada, outlining privacy principles of ownership, control, access and possession (First Nations Information Governance Centre, n.d.). The framework provides a space to clarify and address different ways of understanding and defining Indigenous Peoples' data, including how these perspectives align with or differ from Western and colonial ideas about data and its use (Lauriault, 2022).

It represents a shift in the data world from assuming all data should be openly available (Open by Default) to recognizing that data should be shared thoughtfully, taking into account ethics, consent and potential harm, particularly for Indigenous Peoples (Publish with a Purpose). This new approach supports dialogue, consent and shared control (Robinson *et al.*, 2024).

Sources: Authors' own elaboration based on sources listed in the References section.

Despite strides towards democratizing data, as Figure 2.1 reveals, land and governance data initiatives remain fragmented and limited in number. State-run or officially recognized and accredited entities still dominate (Ndugwa and Omusula, 2025). Such sources might limit some aspects of research due to political sensitivities and data control, creating more data restrictions and gaps.

Customary tenure holders, in particular, may feel restricted in sharing data about their resources due to fear of being targeted and threatened, limiting the ability of Indigenous Peoples' researchers and communities to reshape data ownership and processes (Ravindran, 2024).

Also illustrative of this state domination is the slow rise of private sector data collectors and holders (Robinson *et al.*, 2024). Although private actors are very prominent in certain processes, such as land market or biophysical data, few gather data on land tenure and governance in a systematic and comprehensive manner. They are often put off by the complexity and cost of gathering such data.

The availability of land data

According to the Global Data Barometer (2022) (Box 2.2), the availability of land data is much lower compared to other sectors with longer-established traditions of reporting, such as public finance, procurement, and health. In fact, together with data on political integrity, data on land is amongst the least available globally (Figure 2.2).

Box 2.2

Defining and assessing data availability

Availability refers to whether certain categories of data are available, shared, and of adequate quality to allow reuse for the public good. The availability of land tenure datasets, assessed using data from the Global Data Barometer, relies on the existence of national land registration systems and databases and provides information regarding specific parcels of land, on either:

- tenure type (private land, public land, customary land); and/or
- the actual subjects (people or entities) holding these tenure rights.

Countries are assessed for the availability of their land tenure data, considering the thematic coverage and its extent. Together, these dimensions are scored for the country with a maximum score of 100, indicating the best level of availability, with 0 indicating no availability.

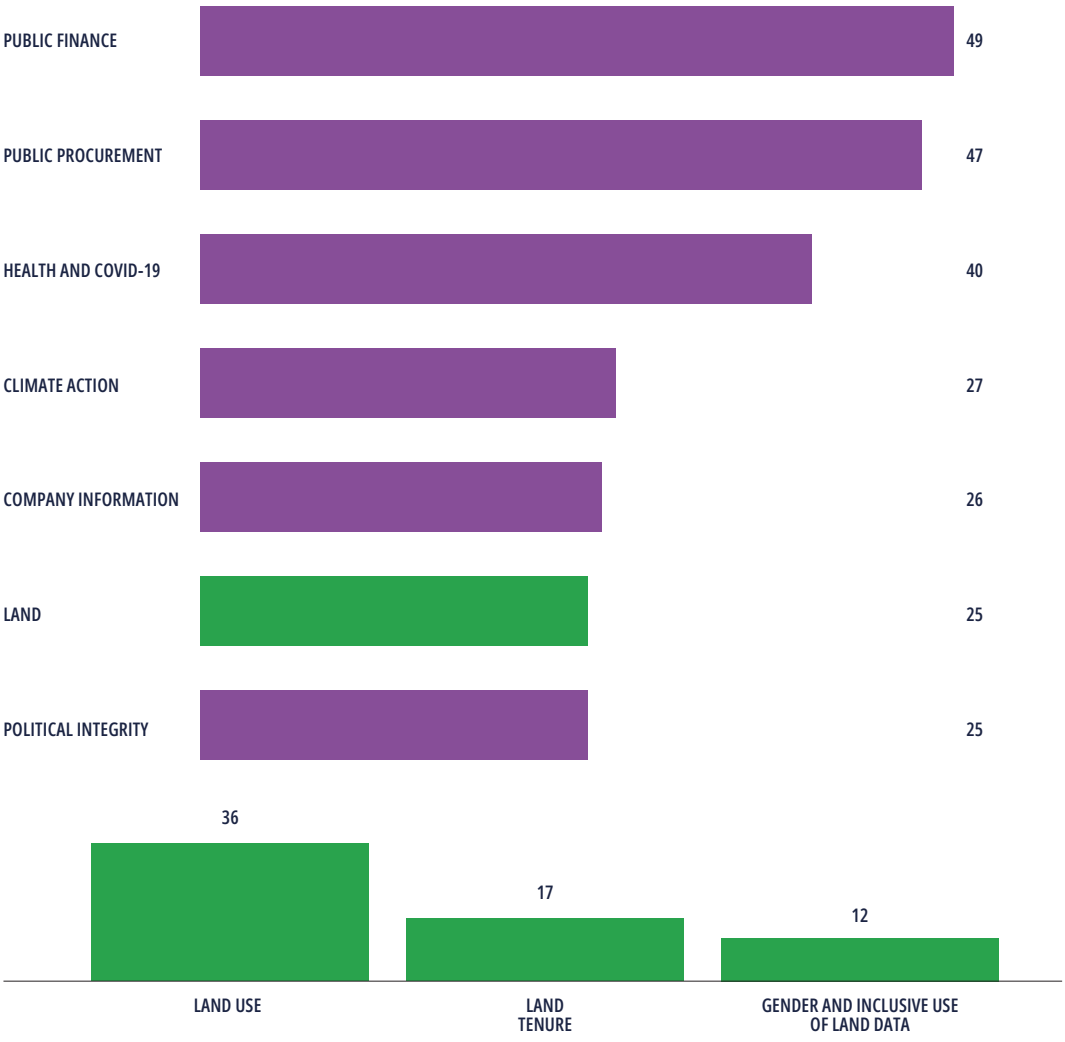
The methodology of the Global Data Barometer is based on the Open Data Barometer. The index draws on an average of several sub-indexes, themselves based on components that include proxies related to with four kinds of data: government self-assessment, peer-reviewed expert survey responses, detailed dataset assessments and secondary data. Scoring uses absolute values on a 0–100 scale. Each component is calculated as the average of its variables. The average of components generates each sub-index. The weighted average of the sub-indexes generates the overall Open Data Barometer score.

The data analysed comes from the 2022 Land Module, developed in partnership with the Land Portal and the Global Data Barometer, covering 105 countries and looking mainly at State/formal data.

Notes: A dataset that only provides details of land parcels, without any information on the tenure rights over them, is not considered a land tenure dataset for the purposes of this work. Additional information on the methodology can be found at ***https://opendatabarometer.org/leadersedition/methodology***

Source: Authors' own elaboration based on Global Data Barometer. 2022. Land Module. ***https://firstedition.globaldatabarometer.org/module/land/*** [Accessed on 15 May 2025].

Figure 2.2. Global land data availability, compared to other sectors



Note: Data availability has been assessed based on the Global Data Barometer, whose methodology is based on the Open Data Barometer methodology (see box 2.2). One hundred and five countries are assessed for the availability of their land data considering the thematic coverage and extent of the data. As per the Open Data Barometer methodology (box 2.2), the score for the 'land' component represents the weighted average of the three sub-indexes it is composed of, i.e. 'land use', 'land tenure', and 'gender and inclusive use of land data'.

Source: Global Data Barometer. 2022. Land Module. ***https://firstedition.globaldatabarometer.org/module/land/*** [Accessed on 15 May 2025].

Data on land tenure is scarce

When land data from the Global Data Barometer (2022) is further disaggregated, the average score for land tenure data availability for the 105 countries assessed in 2022 is 16.7 out of 100. The average availability of data on land tenure is less than half of that available on land use. One reason is the perception that land use data is less sensitive to prevailing political and economic interests, as it does not specifically involve land rights. Additionally, the collection of land tenure data is much more time- and cost-intensive, as it still relies heavily on traditional practices such as systematically updating cadastral records and large-scale surveys. By contrast, land-use data increasingly leverages satellite imagery and cloud computing.

According to Global Data Barometer (2022) data, 59 of the 105 countries assessed (56 percent) have no robust framework for collecting and publishing data on land tenure. Nor do they have detailed and structured land tenure data available for reuse online (see Figures 2.2 and 2.3). As with any assessment, these results depend heavily on the choice of indicators. The contrast with other thematic sectors is striking: for example, only one country scored zero on the comparable questions for public finance, and four countries did so for public procurement.

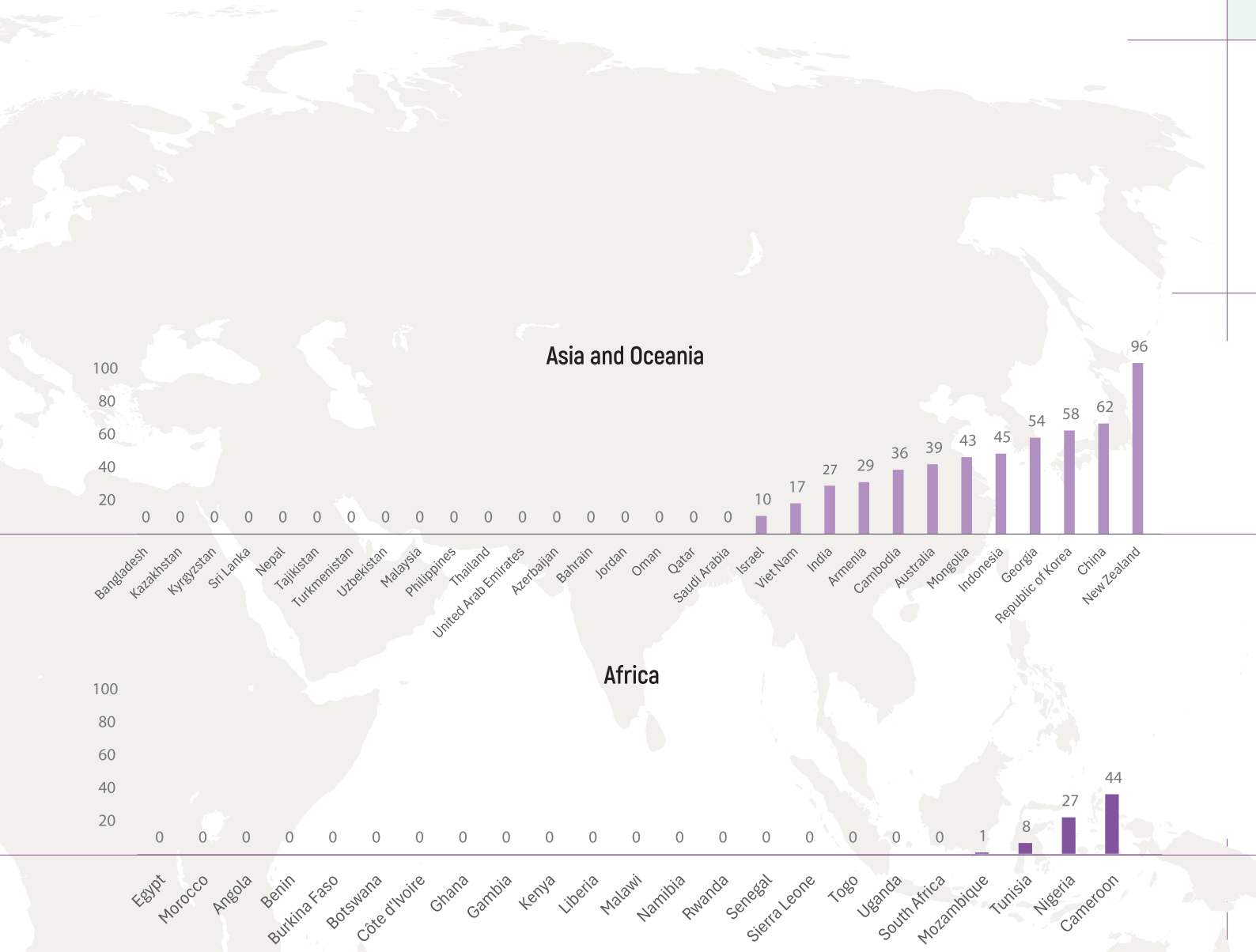
The availability of land tenure data in Africa is particularly scarce. Of 23 countries assessed, only four score positively, with Nigeria and Cameroon showing significant progress. For all other regions, aggregate scores do not differ significantly from the global average. This conceals vast intra-regional differences, with each region having some high-performing countries but also several that score poorly on this metric. The results do not seem to correlate with economic status. Indeed, several high-income countries are among those showing a zero score on land tenure data availability (Figure 2.3).

Figure 2.3. Land tenure data availability by region and country

Refer to the disclaimer on page ii for the names and boundaries used in this map.

Note: The above results of 105 countries, presented regionally, are based on the Global Data Barometer, whose methodology is based on the Open Data Barometer methodology (see Box 2.2).

Source: Global Data Barometer. 2022. Land Module. ***https://firstedition.globaldatabarometer.org/module/land/*** [Accessed on 15 May 2025].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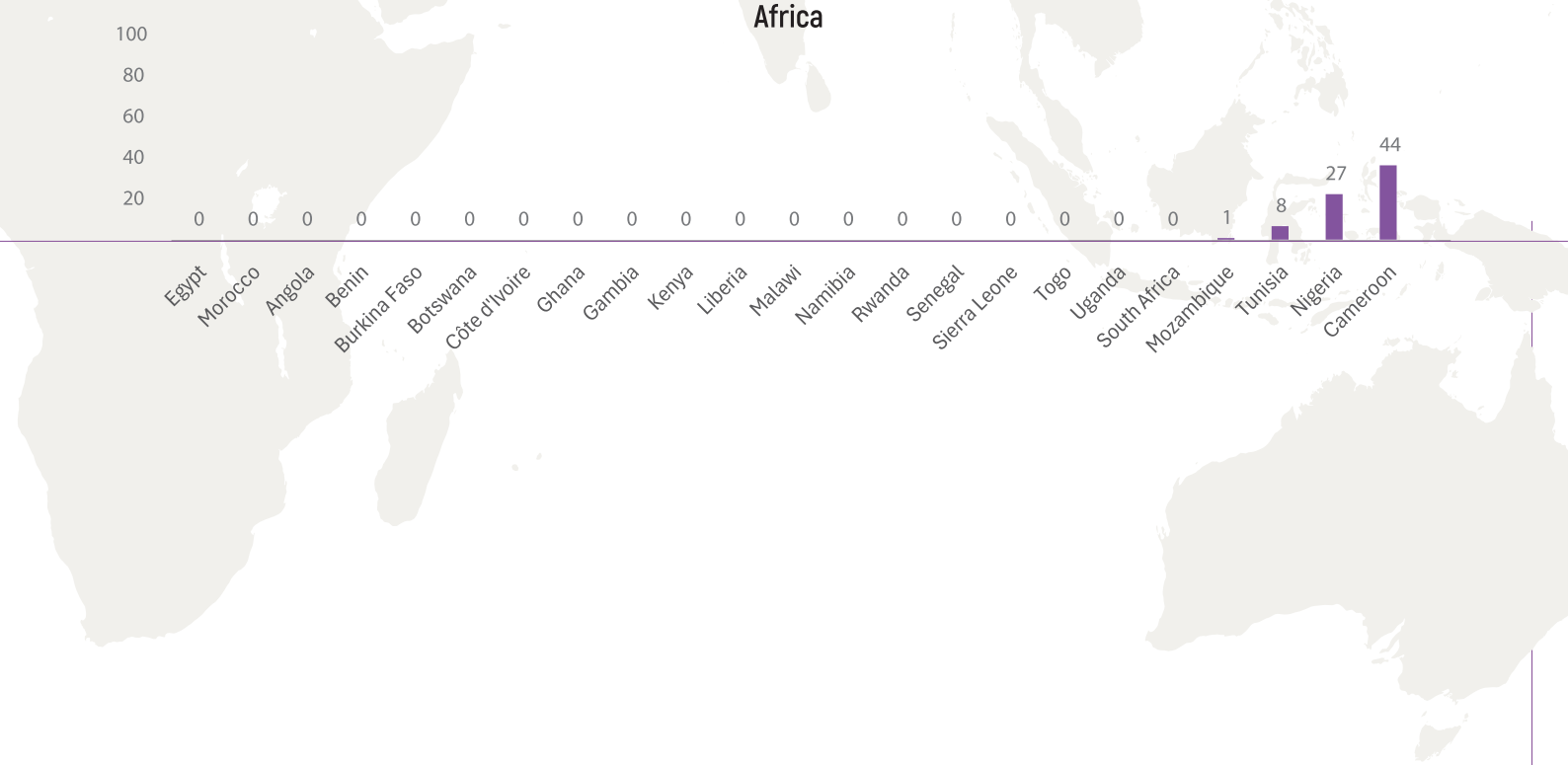
Turkmenistan
Uzbekistan
Malaysia
Philippines
Thailand
United Arab Emirates
Azerbaijan
Bahrain
Jordan
Oman
Qatar
Saudi Arabia
Israel
Viet Nam
India
Armenia
Cambodia
Australia
Mongolia
Indonesia
Georgia
Republic of Korea
China
New Zealand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Malawi
Namibia
Rwanda
Senegal
Sierra Leone
Togo
Uganda
South Africa
Mozambique
Tunisia
Nigeria
Cameroon

Quality of the land data ecosystem

Equally important to the quantity of data is the quality of data. Reliable datasets should be: i) robust and complete, ii) accurate, iii) accessible, iv) interoperable, v) usable, and vi) updated, including accounting for data latency (Davies and Chattapadhyay, 2019). For land tenure, these characteristics are assessed using analyses from the State of Land Information (SOLI) index, which considers two dimensions of land data: completeness and openness (see Box 2.3).

Box 2.3

Assessing data quality

The quality of land tenure data is assessed using the State of Land Information (SOLI) index. SOLI measures both completeness and openness (Land Portal, 2025). Its methodology is based on the Open Data Barometer (see Box 2.2). Completeness refers to the availability of land data and information provided by government organizations responsible for land administration in a country, while openness evaluates the available data and information against set criteria for open data. These assessments go beyond raw data and statistical indicators to include information available through public documents, news articles and other sources, thereby broadening the scope of the information considered.

Based on the Open Data Barometer (see Box 2.2), SOLI covers a larger number of land thematic areas and modules. The assessment for ***completeness*** of land data includes:

- The extent of *geographic coverage* in a given country;
- *Thematic coverage* of categories such as tenure rights, buildings, parcels, customary and Indigenous Peoples' rights, and the uses of the land;
- *Historical data*;
- *Geospatial references*;
- *Disaggregation by sex.*

Criteria for the assessment of ***openness*** of data include:

- Whether the ***data is available*** free of charge, online without the need for registration or filing a request;
- Quality of ***metadata***;
- Extent to which known data ***standards*** are used;
- ***Licensing*** of the data.

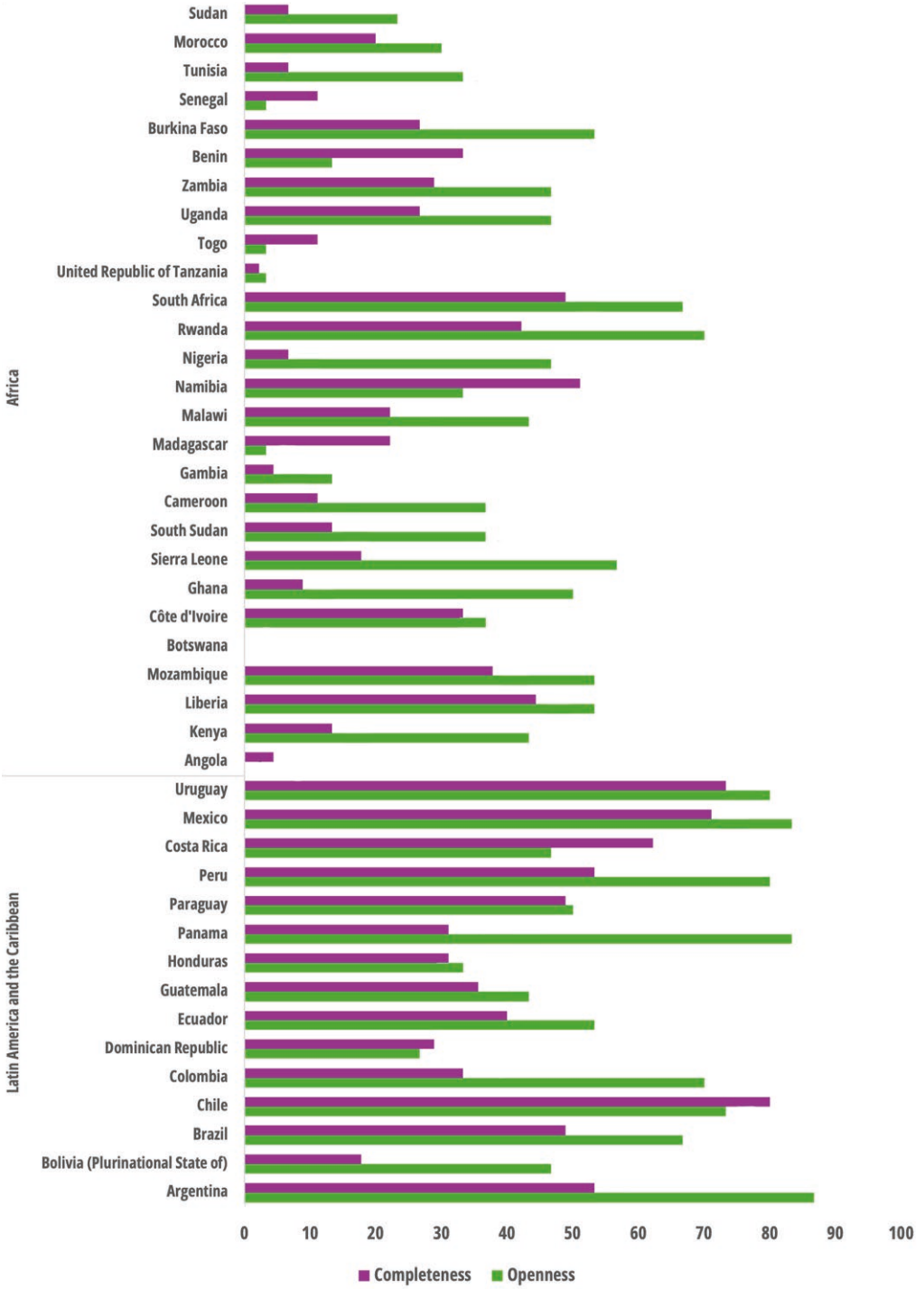
Both factors are scored for a given country on a 0–100 scale, with a maximum score of 100 indicating the highest level of completeness and openness, and 0 indicating none. To date, SOLI has been applied to a smaller set of 42 countries from Africa and the Latin America and Caribbean regions (Figure 2.4).

Source: Authors' own elaboration based on data from Land Portal. 2025. SOLIndex Data Explorer. ***https://solindex.landportal.org/#/countries/?category=2*** [Accessed on 15 May 2025].

In alignment with earlier observations on its relatively limited availability, SOLI results highlight the incompleteness and lack of openness of land tenure data. Although most countries assessed (32 out of 42) fare relatively better on openness (average of 43.4 out of 100) than on completeness (average of 30.1 out of 100), both dimensions remain far from fulfilled (Figure 2.4).

SOLI's results, while limited to the regions of Africa and Latin America and the Caribbean (with data from 27 and 15 countries respectively), are consistent with the geographical differences in land tenure data availability shown by the Global Data Barometer. Here again, Africa scores significantly lower: 23 percent on openness and 32 percent on completeness. Both dimensions vary within and between countries. South Africa, Rwanda and Namibia tend to have higher scores for both openness and completeness compared to the Gambia, the United Republic of Tanzania and Togo. With a few exceptions (Côte d'Ivoire, Mozambique and Liberia), most countries show significant discrepancies between openness and completeness. The pattern implies inconsistent investment in Africa's land tenure data ecosystem. By contrast, Latin American countries show higher and more regular patterns of data openness and completeness.

Figure 2.4. Assessment of completeness and openness of land tenure data (scored 0-100)



Note: The completeness and openness of land tenure data have been assessed through the SOLI index, whose approach is based on the Open Data Barometer but applied to a larger number of land thematic areas and modules (see Box 2.2 and Box 2.3). At present, SOLI has data for 42 countries from Africa and Latin America and the Caribbean.

Source: Land Portal. 2025. SOLIndex Data Explorer. ***https://solindex.landportal.org*** [Accessed on 15 May 2025].

Global reporting on land tenure: focus on the SDGs

The data gaps in the previous section are mirrored by similar shortcomings in global land reporting processes.

Until recently, few, if any, land tenure targets or indicators were included in global reporting mechanisms. Neither the global VGGT nor the African Union's Framework and Guidelines on Land Policy (F&G) has adopted monitoring frameworks. It was only in 2015, when the SDGs succeeded the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), that three land tenure indicators were adopted (Box 2.4). More recently, a land tenure and land use headline indicator was adopted in the Global Biodiversity Framework at CBD COP16. At the time of publication of this report, the only effective reporting on land tenure in a nationally led and internationally standardized manner has taken place in the framework of the SDGs. The focus in this section is therefore on the SDGs (Box 2.4).

Box 2.4

The three land SDGs – definition and methodologies

SDG 1.4.2 – Proportion of the total adult population with secure tenure rights to land: (a) with legally recognized documentation; and (b) who perceive their rights to land as secure, by sex and type of tenure

- Covers all types of land use and tenure as recognized at the country level.
- Measures the share of the population with documented tenure rights for all, including women, communities and the territorial rights of Indigenous Peoples, showing governments' progress in formally granting legal documentation and protecting tenure rights.
- Records individuals' perceptions of their land rights as secure, reflecting perceived economic, social and political risks affecting individuals, households and communities.

Data sources for reporting: National censuses, multi-topic household surveys and administrative data on land tenure (land registries and cadastres).

SDG 5.a.1 – (a) Proportion of the total agricultural population with ownership or secure rights over agricultural land, by sex; and (b) share of women among owners or rights-bearers of agricultural land, by type of tenure

- Scope limited to agricultural households.
- Tracks the prevalence of men and women with tenure rights over agricultural land.
- Reports the share of women among rights-bearers, by type of tenure.
- Focused on *de facto* tenure rights over agricultural land.
- Measures both possession of legally recognized documentation and alienation rights over agricultural land, which may be present even where tenure rights are not documented.

Data sources for reporting: agricultural surveys or general household surveys that collect information on ownership and secure rights to agricultural land.

SDG 5.a.2 – Proportion of countries where the legal framework (including customary law) guarantees women's equal rights to land ownership and/or control

Assesses national legal frameworks to determine the extent to which they guarantee women's equal rights to land ownership and/or control. The framework uses six proxies drawn from international law and internationally accepted good practices to measure the extent to which legal and policy frameworks protect women's land rights, classifying countries into one of six bands. The six proxies are:

- Proxy A: joint registration of land is compulsory or encouraged through economic incentives
- Proxy B: compulsory spousal consent for land transactions
- Proxy C: women's and girls' equal inheritance rights
- Proxy D: allocation of financial resources to increase women's ownership and control over land
- Proxy E: in legal systems that recognize customary land tenure, the existence of explicit protection of the land rights of women
- Proxy F: mandatory quotas for women's participation in land management and administration institutions

Data sources for reporting: publicly available national policies; legislation, covering (as relevant) land, family, marriage, inheritance, land registration, gender-equality laws, constitutions and agrarian reform. Reporting relies on in-depth assessments of national legal frameworks by a broad range of stakeholders.

Notes: All three land-related SDG indicators are officially classified as Tier II (established methodology and international standards).

Source: United Nations Statistical Division (UNSD). 2025b. SDG Indicators Metadata Repository. In: SDG Indicators. [Cited 26 May 2025]. *https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/metadata/https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/metadata/*

SDG reporting on land tenure lags behind

Despite the importance of land rights being recognized in the SDGs, reporting on the three core land indicators remains low. As of March 2025, status of reporting was as follows (Table 2.1 and Figure 2.5):

- ***SDG 1.4.2 –*** 63 countries have reported on the proportion of people with legally recognized documentation of their land rights and 27 countries have reported on the perception of tenure security. Reporting on legal documentation accelerated substantially between 2021 and 2024, but progress on perception of tenure security has been slower.
- ***SDG 5.a.1 –*** 49 countries have reported, and 15 provided multi-year data. Reporting has increased in recent years.
- ***SDG 5.a.2 –*** 83 countries have reported. Pakistan is the only country to have completed the exercise twice; in several other countries, a second round is under way.

Table 2.1. Number of countries reporting on land SDG indicators

Indicator	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025
SDG 1.4.2 (documentation)	0	33	33	33	63	63
SDG 1.4.2 (perception)	0	22	22	22	27	27
SDG 5.a.1	10	32	47	46	49	49
SDG 5.a.2	16	36	52	68	77	83*

Note: While currently 83 countries report on SDG 5.a.2 officially, Chapter 4 elaborates on data for 91 countries based on internal data.

Source: United Nations Statistical Division (UNSD). 2025. SDG Indicators Database. ***https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/dataportal*** [Accessed on 26 May 2025].

Figure 2.5. Share of countries with data published on SDG indicators 1.4.2, 5.a.1 and 5.a.2

Source: United Nations Statistical Division. 2025. SDG Indicators Database. ***https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/dataportal*** [Accessed on 26 May 2025].

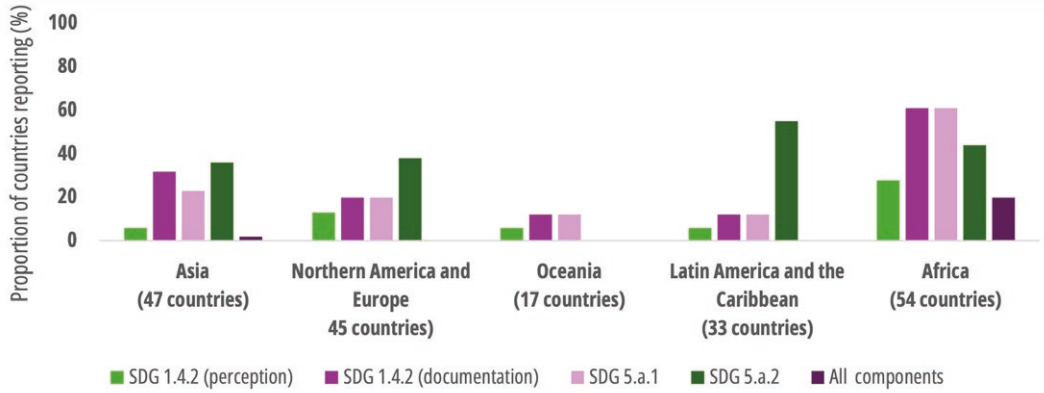
A significant acceleration in SDG reporting is presently noticeable at the global level. It results from additional efforts by custodian agencies, slight adaptations of methodologies and data sources[2], countries' awareness of the need for data and reporting, and a mid-term evaluation of progress towards Agenda 2030. Despite advances in reporting since their adoption, all three indicators are still classified as Tier II, indicating the need to expand data collection and reporting efforts (UN Statistical Division, 2024).

2 For example, the substantial increase in reporting on SDG 1.4.2 arises in part from the expansion of survey data sources, which now include the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) housing tenure module, as well as data reported through Voluntary National Reviews, through which states report on their progress across several Goals of the 2030 Agenda, reflecting innovations in the use of existing data to fill these gaps.

Significant differences across regions and indicators

Countries' status of reporting on the land SDG indicators varies significantly across regions and indicators. Only 12 countries worldwide have reported on all three SDG indicators. Overall, Africa has the highest rate of countries reporting for each indicator. Of the 27 countries that report on both sub-indicators of SDG 1.4.2, 15 are in Africa. Similarly, Africa accounts for 65 percent of reporting countries for SDG 5.a.1 and 30 percent for SDG 5.a.2. Additionally, 12 of the 15 countries that have reported more than once on SDG 5.a.1 are in Africa (Figure 2.6).

Figure 2.6. Regional reporting rates for land SDG indicators



Source: United Nations Statistical Division. 2025. SDG Indicators Database. ***https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/dataportal*** [Accessed on 26 May 2025].

In other regions, the reporting landscape is not as rich. Outside Africa, only Cambodia reports on the three land SDG indicators. Excluding the perception component, only four non-African countries report on the remaining three components: Armenia, Georgia, Nepal and Pakistan.

Challenges in reporting

Despite countries' commitment to the 2030 Agenda, the limited progress achieved at this stage in implementation indicates diverse and significant obstacles. These can be summarized in five categories:

First, the ***voluntary nature of SDG reporting*** means that countries may not report on certain indicators considered too sensitive or not a priority, such as in high-income countries where these Goals and Targets may generally be considered achieved. Additionally, land indicators are often not prioritized by developing countries due to a lack of data, high costs, and politically sensitive land issues, which can hinder reporting (Confraria, Ciarli and Noyons, 2024). As a result, reporting on SDG 5 Gender (22 percent of all countries have at least one data point) is more than three times lower than on SDG 15 Life on Land and less than half the average reporting on all other Goals combined (World Bank, 2021a).

Second, the ***data generation and reporting process is rigid***. The SDGs are state-led. Custodian agencies (FAO for SDGs 5.a.1 and 5.a.2 and the World Bank and UN-Habitat for SDG 1.4.2) provide technical support, and in the absence of national reporting capacity, may produce estimates, which require national validation before publication. Such validation can create bottlenecks for national statistical offices during the validation period, resulting in not all existing data being cleared for reporting. Furthermore, since states are not obliged to validate/report data, credible non-official data can also go unutilized, especially for more politically sensitive indicators. This is the case for SDG 16.10.1 on killings and harassment of human rights defenders, which certain countries choose not to report on (Global Witness, 2024).

Third, there is ***limited data availability and insufficient capacity*** to meet the reporting requirements of the SDGs, which are not only numerous but also complex. According to the World Bank, most countries' statistical systems appear to be struggling to provide data on SDG indicators (World Bank, 2021b). This is particularly the case for all three land indicators. SDGs 1.4.2 and 5.a.1 require the inclusion of specific modules into a country's censuses and household and/or agricultural surveys. SDG 5.a.2 requires in-depth legal expertize to analyze complex and often sensitive issues related to gender equality and land rights within national legal frameworks.

Fourth, ***resources are too limited*** to adequately respond to the methodologies. For reporting on SDG indicators that require agricultural surveys and censuses (notably SDG 1.4.2 and 5.a.1, but also several others such as SDG 2.3.1 and 2.3.2), significant financial and technical resources are required.

SDG 5.a.2 capacity building and multi-stakeholder consultations require considerable time, human and financial resources. Although some efforts have been made (for example, through the 50x2030 Initiative to Close the Agricultural Data Gap [World Bank, 2019]), overall financial support for the implementation of the three land SDGs has remained limited. The initial excitement of having the land indicators adopted quickly faded, leaving custodians and national statistical offices with limited resources to adequately support states with the implementation. In addition, while funding flows for development data have rebounded since the COVID-19 pandemic, the year-on-year increase in 2022 was significantly smaller than in past years, reflecting current donor priorities (PARIS21, 2024; Omusula *et al.*, forthcoming).

Fifth, ***complementary data sources are underutilized***. Since the SDGs are country-led, only official or state-validated data tend to be used for reporting. While countries may choose to integrate complementary data sources into national information systems led by statistics offices, this is usually not done in practice, especially for the land indicators discussed here. As highlighted by CIVICUS (2024), this gives states control over the process (and over whether to report) and also vests control over the data itself within states, potentially affecting the objectivity and quality of both the data and reporting. Complementary data sources are therefore, in most cases, excluded.

Efforts to strengthen land SDGs reporting

Alongside political calls from the international community (United Nations, 2024) and the scaling up of outreach by custodians and their partners and supporters (International Land Coalition [ILC], 2024), several endeavours have been undertaken to accelerate reporting on the land SDGs.

First, an option recently engaged is the ***use of proxies***. In the absence of countries' ability to use the prescribed methods for data collection, slight methodological amendments through proxies that are easier to report and appropriate to national contexts are applied. Proxies are not replacements for, or structural changes to, official SDG indicators. Such flexibility allows the use of the best available information in the absence of official SDG reporting capacities (see Box 2.5). Depending on the methods/proxies used, results can be distorted and lead to an inaccurate representation of the situation on the ground (ILC, 2023). However, such measures are stopgaps until capacities to apply the prescribed and agreed methodologies are developed, given trade-offs between increased ease of reporting through customization and the overall quality and comparability of results.

For SDG 5.a.1, the initial methodology was modified to provide much-needed flexibility to substantially increase country coverage (Box 2.5).

Box 2.5

Methodological adjustments to facilitate SDG reporting – the case of SDG 5.a.1

SDG 5.a.1 was adjusted to allow temporary calculation based on "(self-) reported ownership/possession of agricultural land", rather than the original methodology that only considered three rights categories: documented ownership, the right to sell, and the right to bequeath. This adjustment enables countries to leverage existing international and regional surveys that include questions on self-reported ownership of land. By tapping into existing instruments such as the World Bank Living Standards Measurement Study (LSMS), DHS, MICS, and the *Enquête Harmonisée sur les Conditions de Vie des Ménages* (EHCVM), the number of reporting countries has increased in recent years.

Source: Authors' own elaboration based on United Nations Statistical Division. 2025. SDG Indicators Metadata Repository. In: SDG Indicators. [Cited 26 May 2025]. ***https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/metadata/***

Second, related to the proxy and methodological changes above, efforts are being made to ***better mobilize existing data-collection tools***. For example, while administrative data and censuses form the basis for reporting on SDG 1.4.2, custodian agencies are exploring the use of other survey tools and data-collection initiatives such as the Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) and UNICEF's Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS), from which relevant information can be extracted to expand coverage. For SDG 5.a.1, the methodological adjustment mentioned above enables the use of additional data sources and leverages a series of existing international and regional survey initiatives (see Box 2.5).

Third, to strengthen the volume, quality and scope of data, initiatives that promote the ***mobilization of existing non-formal data sources*** are expanding. Accepting complementary data sources not only enhances data availability for reporting, but also allows better monitoring and documentation of the complexities and specificities of land tenure. Furthermore, it allows better coverage of all tenure systems and the bundle of land rights accessible to peoples and groups across different tenure and governance systems.

The example of land data for and by Indigenous Peoples, as described in Box 2.1, illustrates this trend, promoting traditional knowledge as a source of information and data, as well as better documenting customary land tenure systems.

Some of these datasets – especially where no formal data exist – are crucial for filling information gaps on topics addressed by the SDGs. One example is the data developed by the Alliance for Land, Indigenous and Environmental Defenders (ALLIED) that contribute to SDG 16.10.1, which records killings of and attacks on human rights defenders (see Box 2.6). Another example is the Property Rights Index (Prindex), which measures perceptions of tenure security (aligned with sub-indicator [b] of SDG 1.4.2), which was used by Uruguay in the latest round of reporting on SDG 1.4.2.

Box 2.6

SDG 16.10.1 and citizen-generated data

Past the mid-point of Agenda 2030 implementation, and despite growing recognition of the risks faced by human rights defenders – specifically those defending land and the environment – official data against indicator 16.10.1 remain woefully limited. Of the 330 Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) submitted since 2015 by 188 countries and the European Union, only 19 provide data against indicator 16.10.1, and just four reports (representing slightly more than 1 percent of the total) indicate that at least one human rights defender, journalist or trade unionist has been killed in the country (ALLIED and ILC, 2023; UN Statistical Division, 2025).

In 2024, however, the United Nations (UN) reported the killings of 502 human rights defenders, journalists and trade unionists, adding up to at least 4 183 killings since 2015. The overwhelming majority of these cases do not come from government reporting but from civil-society data collectors, including ALLIED. Although these data are only reported at the regional level, they showcase the potential contribution of citizen-led data to formal reporting processes (UN Statistical Division, 2025).

Sources: Authors' own elaboration based on sources listed in the References section.

Involving citizens in data production signifies a shift towards a more collaborative and participatory model of data governance. The refreshed dynamic embodies principles of transparency, participation and shared responsibility, reflecting an evolving relationship in which citizens are not just subjects of governance but active participants.

The newly adopted Copenhagen Framework on Citizen Data by the Collaborative on Citizen Data (UN, 2024), as well as the Human Rights-Based Approach to Data (HRBAD) (OHCHR, 2018), support such engagements. A handful of countries, including Kenya, Ghana, the Philippines, Nepal, Kyrgyzstan, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and Canada, have already established strong frameworks for integrating citizen-generated data (UN Statistical Division, 2023). Kenya and Ghana, for example, are some of the first and only countries that have integrated citizen data into official statistics and have reported this data in their Voluntary National Review and to the UN SDG Global Database. Although it is unclear how much this contributed to the land-data landscape and the use of citizen-led land data at the country level, the processes are well structured, including mapping of stakeholders, challenges and limitations to the datasets, mitigation measures, and validation of quality. This paves the road for alternative data sources to complement formal reporting processes (Box 2.7). To realize these benefits in practice, clear standards, stakeholder mapping, validation protocols and sustained capacity building are essential.

Box 2.7

Kenya and citizen-led data for SDG reporting

In Kenya, the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) identified citizen data as a rich source to fill existing data gaps for SDG reporting as well as planning and monitoring development initiatives and programs. With the leadership of the NBS, Kenya developed a roadmap for working with citizen data which prioritized collective action and is inclusive of other institutions and civil society. National statistical offices, together with civil society data organizations and other partners, agreed on a shared vision and developed an operationalization process for validating citizen data.

The UN Human Rights Office designed a standard model of Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) as a tool to fortify collaborative working relationships between these institutions. In 2017, Kenya was the first country to sign such an MoU between the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics and the Kenyan National Human Rights Commission (UN DESA, 2019).

A technical committee, co-chaired by a CSO (SDG Kenya Forum) and NBS, addresses quality concerns, while the working committees within this committee map out the data gaps across the SDG goals. These committees also help create trust in the process and among the actors. Over 90 percent of the CSOs are working with qualitative data. Capacity building is still needed for both National Statistical Offices and CSOs to use this data (UN Statistical Division, 2025).

Resulting from this process, in 2024 Kenya used citizen-generated data (provided by ALLIED; see Box 2.6) to highlight human rights violations, especially against Indigenous Peoples, land, and environmental defenders (ILC, 2024).

Sources: Authors' own elaboration based on sources listed in the References section.

The above adjustments and efforts for technical assistance and capacity development have the potential to result in a significant increase in reporting, which is essential for tracking progress towards the SDG targets on promoting secure tenure rights for all.

Land tenure and governance data remain a key priority

The land data ecosystem plays a vital role in supporting advocacy around land rights, climate action, and sustainable development. As datasets become more available and complete, they help to document the status quo, advance evidence-based decision-making, and ultimately support progress towards tenure security, human rights, and the SDGs.

While progress is being made, this global assessment shows there is still a long way to go. More countries now have information laws, and many are improving how land data is shared. However, despite more data portals and publishing efforts, the quantity is still relatively low, and quality and consistency remain uneven, limiting longitudinal compatibility and interoperability. Data gaps are especially pronounced in core areas such as land tenure. The land sector remains among the least open globally, with much of the relevant data still not digitized or not collected at all.

Investment in and political commitment to better land tenure data remain low overall (Open Government Partnership, 2022), as shown by the limited reporting on SDG indicators 1.4.2, 5.a.1, and 5.a.2. Greater collaboration across the land data community is urgently needed, including not only producing and sharing data but also building the skills and systems to generate and use them effectively. Such efforts go beyond technical goals: they contribute directly to transparency, accountability, and broader development outcomes.

Improving land data will require stronger governance. Key elements include clear data-sharing agreements, common standards, and active cooperation among all data holders. Multi-stakeholder partnerships are essential to build and sustain a more open, inclusive, and effective land data ecosystem.

States are the biggest landowners, with legal ownership of over 64 percent of land worldwide. 26 percent is privately owned by individuals, companies, or collectives. For the remaining approximately 10 percent of the world's lands, tenure status is unknown.

Chapter 3

THE STATE OF LAND TENURE

3

Who owns the world's lands, and who feels secure in their rights to land? This chapter explores the global state of land tenure, examining the types and extent of different tenure systems and how they relate to people's sense of security over land. To examine the complexities of protecting legitimate tenure rights, the chapter presents a conceptual exercise and a broad global analysis with context-specific insights, such as the frequent gap between legal protections and actual practice.

Global land tenure distribution

Land tenure is often grouped into three broad categories to allow for global comparison: public, private, and customary. This simple categorization contains multiple variations and hybrids within the complex web of land tenure systems (Scoones, 2023). Systems can overlap and vary significantly between their legal and practical status (FAO, 2002).

All three categories of tenure systems can be further characterized as state and non-state with respect to legal ownership. State land includes public domain land, states' private assets, and non-documented and non-recognized customary lands. Non-state land includes private land under absolute, freehold, and leasehold ownership, as well as documented private and common holdings under collective rights for Indigenous Peoples, Afro-descendant Peoples, and other traditional and non-traditional communities. One additional category – Other land – exists to account for a small number of systems with context-specific cases that fall outside the two main categories. Examples include land for religious establishments (Table 3.1 and Box 3.1).

This categorization enables the alignment, comparison, and analysis of the large majority of tenure systems in practice (and the broader legal frameworks that govern them). The legal–customary differentiation reflects a gradient within and between tenure categories. For example, customary lands can be legally recognized, documented, and privately owned, whereas privately occupied land can be undocumented as part of a customary system. This classification is likely to gain depth and evolve in alignment with the concept of customary tenure rights and their specific applications.

Table 3.1. Conceptual framework for tenure classification

Tenure category	Modalities of land tenure practices	Landholder
Public	Public domain land (owned by the state, inalienable, for uses such as public infrastructure, public spaces, government buildings, concessions to public entities, among others).	**state**
	State's private assets (land owned by the state, that is transferable, used for specific state interests and functions such as prisons, universities or development projects).	**state**
Private	Private ownership by individuals or private entities (land owned by the individual or absolute, freehold, leasehold ownership).	**non-state**
	Land owned by the state, assigned to individuals, or leased out as concessions to private entities.	**state**
Customary tenure	Private and common holdings under documented collective ownership rights for Indigenous Peoples.	**non-state**
	Private and common holdings under documented collective ownership rights for Afro-descendant Peoples, tribal communities, and other traditional and non-traditional communities.	**non-state**
	Private and common holdings under recognized and designated collective use rights (owned by the state) for Indigenous Peoples.	**state**
	Private and common holdings under recognized and designated collective use rights (owned by the state) for Afro-descendant Peoples, tribal communities, and other traditional and non-traditional communities.	**state**
	Private and common holdings under unrecognized collective rights for Indigenous Peoples.	**state**
	Private and common holdings under unrecognized collective rights for Afro-descendant Peoples, tribal communities, and other traditional and non-traditional communities.	**state**
Other land	Land for religious establishments; other country-specific practices that do not align with any of the major categories.	**variable**

Note: Table 3.1 is explained further in Box 3.1

Source: Authors' own elaboration adapted from numerous sources, including Feder and Feeny (1991) (Feder, G. and Feeny, D., 1991. Land Tenure and Property Rights: Theory and Implications for Development Policy. *The World Bank Economic Review*, 5(1): 135–153. ***https://doi.org/10.1093/wber/5.1.135***), FAO (2002) (FAO, 2002. Land Tenure and Rural Development. FAO Land Tenure Series (3). ***https://www.fao.org/4/y4307e/y4307e00.htm***), and Chouquer (2011) (Chouquer, G., 2011. *Aspects and Characteristics of State-Owned Land in West Africa.* "Land Tenure and Development" Technical Committee).

BOX 3.1

Coming to terms with terminology

The fields of land tenure and governance utilise a lot of specialist vocabulary whose meanings can change over time or be interpreted differently according to context. In this report, we chose to avoid some commonly used terms which could have given rise to ambiguity or inaccuracy.

Why not de jure and de facto?

While the terms de jure and de facto are often used in academic and policy literature as shorthand for the legal and practical ownership and use of land, these terms also have other interpretations that are not captured by the distinction. For the sake of avoiding ambiguity, we have preferred to use context-specific terms that more precisely describe the nature of tenure arrangements. Examples include legally recognized, customary, undocumented, or informal, depending on the legal status, social legitimacy, and practical enforcement of land rights in a given setting.

The use of the term holders of customary tenure rights and related expressions

In this report, we use the term ***holders of customary tenure rights*** and related expressions such as ***customary communities***, ***customary tenure rights***, and ***customary systems***. The deliberate choice of the term "custom" over "law" is far from trivial. Beyond the conventional distinctions recognized in social sciences or legal studies, this terminology actively contributes to the recognition, protection, and promotion of unique and still-vibrant practices. It does so irrespective of their formal acknowledgement within statutory frameworks. Numerous populations are encompassed by this terminology, which does not aim to assimilate them into an indistinct collective but rather to reaffirm and preserve their specific place within a coherent legal framework.

Why not IPLC?

Indigenous Peoples and local communities are often lumped together under the abbreviation "IPLCs". This can be inaccurate for several reasons.

- Indigenous Peoples are distinct from local communities and have rights that are prior to, and independent of, state recognition. A local community could refer to any community, such as the general population.

- It ignores Indigenous Peoples' distinct cultural identity, their right to control their lands, territories, and resources, as well as their right to self-determination, governance, customary laws and juridical systems.
- It may diffuse Indigenous Peoples' rights by ascribing "local communities", or the general population, rights over Indigenous Peoples' lands.

In a statement in July 2023, the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, the UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, and the UN Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples urged all UN entities to refrain from conflating, associating, combining, or equating Indigenous Peoples with non-Indigenous entities, such as minorities, groups experiencing vulnerability, or local communities.

For further information, please refer to the latest recommendations made by three UN Mechanisms on the rights of Indigenous Peoples, including:

- Statement by the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFII), Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, and the Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, in Geneva (Switzerland), July 2023;
- Outcome document of the meeting between the UNPFII, the United Nations Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (EMRIP), and the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, at FAO Headquarters in Rome (Italy), 26–28 February 2024;
- Final report of the 22nd Session of the UNPFII, with oral amendment, 17–28 April 2023 (recommendation 25).

Source: Authors' own elaboration based on sources listed in the References section.

The data discussed in this section covers 11.7 billion hectares (ha), or 90 percent of the world's land. Data sources, coverage, and disaggregation differ significantly across countries. A combination of data sources is required to reflect the state and quantification of land tenure systems, including national land reports, agricultural censuses and forest tenure assessments (see Appendix 3). As per the focus of this report (given both the specificities of urban tenure and the focus on the tenure and governance of rural lands), this quantification generally excludes urban land.

Who owns which lands in the world?

States have legal ownership of over 64 percent of land worldwide, with 26 percent known to be privately owned by individuals, companies, or collectives. For the remaining approximately 10 percent of the world's lands, tenure status is unknown (Figure 3.1).

The picture changes significantly when tenure rights are considered in practice, as state lands may be assigned, even permanently, to others. Some examples include state land used privately under leasehold or concession agreements, or the practice of designating state land as customary community land.

As such, ***of the 64 percent of state land worldwide***:

- ***28 percent is public land*** (public domain land or private state assets);
- ***13 percent is customary land*** that has designated tenure rights or legal recognition but without documented ownership, occupied by Indigenous Peoples, Afro-descendant Peoples, tribal communities, or other traditional and non-traditional communities;
- ***21 percent is customary land that is unrecognized***, occupied by Indigenous Peoples, Afro-descendant Peoples, tribal communities, or other traditional and non-traditional communities;
- ***2 percent operates under states' private asset arrangements***.

Of the 26 percent of non-state land:

- ***18 percent is owned privately*** by individuals and companies;
- ***8 percent is legally owned by holders of customary land***.

The ***main types of land tenure systems*** existing in practice around the world can be summed up as follows:

- ***Twenty-eight percent (3.7 billion ha) of the world's land is public land, owned and managed by states.*** This land is designated for public use, such as roadways, seashores, and other public infrastructure. Public land also includes the states' private assets and large tracts of terrestrial protected areas. The main difference between the area classified as official or formal state land and public land comes from legal definitions in certain countries. In some cases, such as Mozambique, the constitution states that all land belongs to the state. In others, such as Togo, any land not explicitly registered as privately owned is considered state land by default.

- ***Eighteen percent (2.4 billion ha) of the world's land is owned by private individuals and corporations.*** Another 2 percent (0.2 billion ha) operates under states' private asset arrangements.
- ***Forty-two percent (5.5 billion ha) of the world's land is customary land.*** Of these lands, only 8 percent (1 billion ha) are formally recognized with documented ownership rights, individually or collectively. For the 34 percent that are not recognized and documented, 13 percent (1.7 billion ha) are under designated use rights and 21 percent (2.7 billion ha) are unrecognized by governments.

Figure 3.1. Global tenure: share of land operating under various land ownership and land tenure modalities

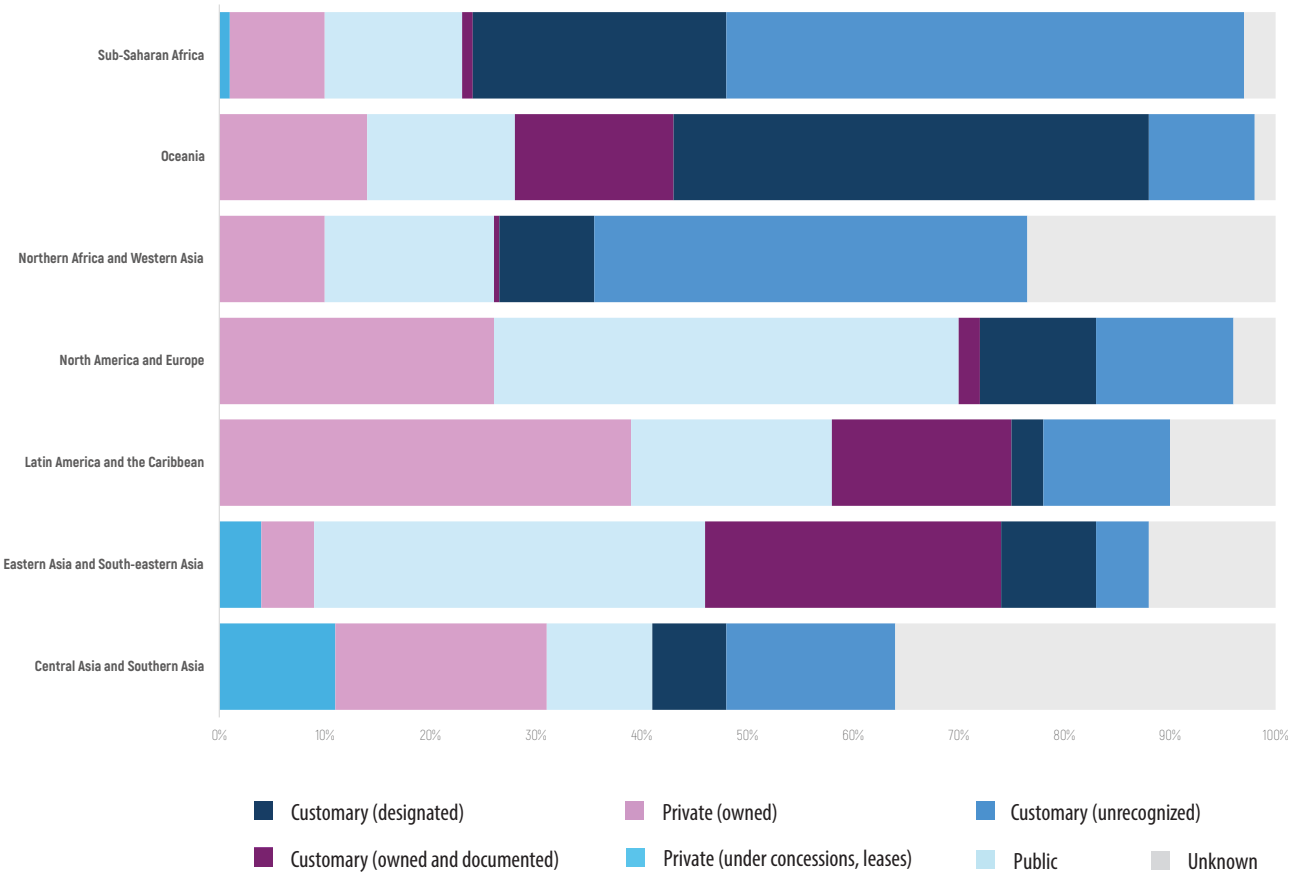
Note: The classification uses the typology described in Table 3.1 and the data as detailed in Appendix 3. The data discussed in this section covers 11.7 billion ha, or 90 percent of the world's land. The exercise of aggregating available tenure data from various countries relies on a variety of sources. When available, nationally reported data (through national land audit reports, land accounts, and agricultural censuses collecting tenure data, as well as forest assessments with tenure disaggregation) are used. In the absence of, or in complement to, government sources, secondary data sources such as UN reports, academic sources, and research undertaken by institutions in the land tenure and governance sector were utilized (RRI, LandMark maps, USAID, Landesa, Land Portal, etc.).

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

Regional variations in tenure systems and distribution

Land tenure systems show strong variations across different regional contexts (Figure 3.2).

Figure 3.2. Land tenure distribution across regions (%)



Note: The data presented in this graph is based on the same data as previous analyses in this section, covering 11.7 billion ha, or 90 percent of the world's land. It combines various sources to reflect the state and quantification (including national land reports, agricultural censuses, and forest tenure assessments – see Appendix 3 for further details), disaggregated by region. Central Asia, Southern Asia, Northern Africa, and Europe have the most data gaps due to a lack of both available national data and mapping exercises by other institutions that are used to derive these estimates.

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

In ***sub-Saharan Africa***, although 73 percent of land is held under customary tenure, only 1 percent is formally recognized as such. Most of this land remains undocumented and under state ownership, though some is designated for community use or privately owned. In countries such as Kenya and Mozambique, customary rights may still be legally recognized even without formal documentation.

In ***Eastern and South-eastern Asia***, 51 percent of the land is designated as state land, heavily influenced by China's legal framework, where all land is either government- or collectively owned. Only nine percent of the land in the region is privately held, while 42 percent falls under customary tenure, mainly due to China's recognition of collective land rights. Other countries, such as Indonesia and Viet Nam, also legally classify most land as state-owned.

In ***Central and Southern Asia***, 30 percent of the land is held under customary tenure, mostly comprising state-owned land with designated use rights, particularly in pastoral areas of Central Asia. Private and public tenure each account for about a quarter of the land, while 18 percent lacks precise tenure classification. Customary ownership is virtually undocumented, except in small areas of India, Tajikistan, and Bhutan.

In ***Northern Africa and Western Asia***, at least 65 percent of the land is classified as state land, although much of it overlaps with unrecognized customary claims. Only 9 percent is officially designated for customary use, and 24 percent of the land has unclear tenure due to conflicting statutory, customary and religious laws. These overlapping frameworks contribute to disputes in countries such as Jordan, Morocco, Sudan and Yemen (Khechen and Samaha, 2022).

A large share of areas without sufficient data to establish ownership or tenure are likely to fall under state ownership since, in the legal systems in several countries, lands traditionally classified as mawat or 'dead land' were reclassified as state land, with limited scope for individuals to gain ownership rights (FAO, 2012). Precise figures on the area under mawat, private tenure (*mulk*) land, and religiously held (*waqf*) land remain largely unavailable.

Latin America and the Caribbean have some of the highest levels of private land tenure globally, at 39 percent. The region also shows strong recognition of customary land rights, with 20 percent acknowledged (17 percent owned, 3 percent for use). However, 12 percent of these lands remain unrecognized. Public lands make up 19 percent, and 9 percent of land has unclear tenure status.

In ***Europe and North America***, private land ownership is dominant. It accounts for 55 percent in Europe (excluding the Russian Federation, where public lands are more prevalent) and 32 percent in North America, primarily driven by agricultural and forest land ownership. Europe also has 9 percent of its land under customary tenure, mostly commons or Indigenous Peoples' lands in the Arctic. In North America, 49 percent of the land is considered customary, but over half remains unrecognized, particularly in Canada. State lands account for 21 percent in Europe and 15 percent in North America. In the Russian Federation, most land is state-owned, although traditional Indigenous Peoples' collectives and Cossack associations possess designated-use rights for approximately 4 percent of the national territory (Garnett *et al.*, 2018).

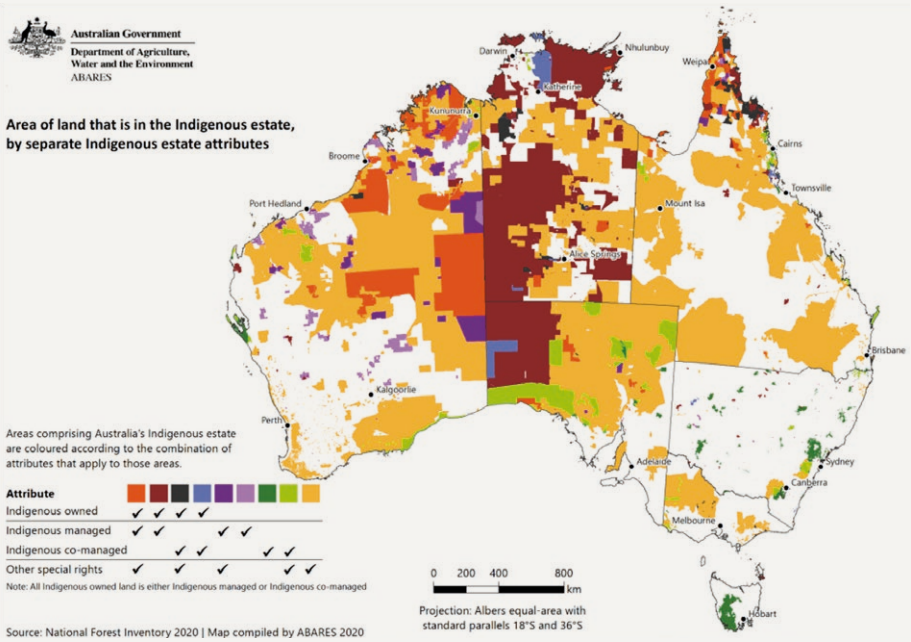
In ***Oceania (excluding New Zealand and Australia)***, customary tenure is widespread in Small Island Developing States (SIDS), accounting for over 90 percent of the land. The figure of 14 percent private land is attributable almost entirely to the outsized effect of Australia and New Zealand. However, numerous complex and overlapping customary schemes also exist within these countries (see Box 3.2).

Box 3.2

The complexity of documenting customary lands: the example of Australia

Indigenous Peoples' land tenure can be highly complex and multilayered. The 437.7 million ha (57 percent of Australia's terrestrial area) of land under Indigenous Peoples' ownership includes several overlapping combinations of rights (ABARES *et al.*, 2020).

Figure A: The multiple categories of Indigenous Peoples' lands in Australia



Refer to the disclaimer on page ii for the names and boundaries used in this map.

Source: Jacobsen, R., Howell, C. & Read, S.M. 2020. Australia's Indigenous land and forest estate: separate reporting of Indigenous ownership, management and other special rights. ABARES technical report. Canberra, ABARES. December. ***https://doi.org/10.25814/bqr0-4m20.*** CC BY 4.0

These can be delineated into the following categories (Figure A):

- Indigenous Peoples' owned and managed (freehold) - 17 percent;
- Indigenous Peoples' managed (managed but not owned by Indigenous Peoples' communities; land owned by Indigenous People with formal shared management agreements with government agencies) - 18 percent;
- Indigenous Peoples' co-managed (land owned and managed by other parties, but with formal, legally binding agreements to include input from Indigenous People in the process of developing and implementing a management plan) - 4.3 percent;
- Other special rights (lands subject to native title determinations, registered Indigenous Land Use Agreements, and legislated special cultural use provisions) - 44 percent.

In addition, claims over 89.5 million ha (35 percent of Australia's land), which may overlap with other existing land rights, were still pending a court decision. These were before the National Native Title Tribunal (LandMark, 2024).

Notes: (*) This figure for the total area of Indigenous People's estate is derived after accounting for overlaps in the four categories specified above.

Source: Authors' own elaboration based on sources listed in the References section.

Variations in documentation rates

The land tenure data discussed above give some insights into the coverage of documentation in different countries and systems.

In total, worldwide, combining documented customary lands, documented public land and private land, over 35 percent of land may be considered documented.

Another 55 percent of land is undocumented, with a further 10 percent of land having unclear status. 5.5 billion ha (42 percent of the world's land) is held by Indigenous Peoples, and holders of customary tenure rights. Yet only 1 billion ha (8 percent of the world's land) is documented with ownership rights. This means that a mere 18 percent of customary lands are documented and legally owned by customary communities.

In several countries, a combination of designated use rights and legal recognition of ownership without documentation applies. As such, customary communities may possess documentation that grants them certain rights to land under state ownership, which are more limited in terms of the scope of the rights or the period for which these rights are valid. Customary lands with such relatively limited documented rights represent 7 percent of the total 13 percent of state lands under designated collective use rights. This is the case with DUATs (*Direito de Uso e Aproveitamento da Terra*, 'Right of Use and Benefit of Land') in Mozambique, which are not always formal documents but represent the rights of use and benefit of land (Norfolk and Liversage, 2002; Tanner, 2002). Other applications of such processes of securing rights include protected areas where community-based forest management agreements are in place, as in the Philippines (Gavan, Fernandez Jnr and Bande, 2023). In Madagascar, *Les petits papiers* ('small papers') represent a social practice where handwritten documents are widely used to formalize land transfers and establish ownership claims (Teyssier, 2010; Burnod *et al.*, 2014). While communities certainly have stronger rights to these lands than those that are entirely unrecognized, in practice, they may face limitations on the tenure security and protection offered under prevailing law. A lack of formalization does not necessarily reflect an absence of statutory recognition (RRI, 2023). Nevertheless, even among communities that achieve legal recognition through legislation, many still seek full land registration to "double-lock" their rights (Alden Wily, 2017). Communities often find reassurance in delineating boundaries in a formal registry to make their land clearly legible to the state and outside interests (Alden Wily, 2010).

In some countries, any unregistered land automatically falls under public land. Other legal systems provide statutory recognition through less cumbersome processes (as in the example of Kenya and Mozambique, mentioned in the previous section).

Of the total known public land worldwide, only 846 million ha, representing 23 percent of public land and 7 percent of the world's land, are estimated to be documented.

There are numerous possible reasons for this, including an absence of policy orientation and transparent procedures, weak statistical information, unreliable data, and poor analysis of state property. However, a key explanation for the lack of documentation of public land relates to fragmented and inefficient institutional arrangements. The problem is compounded by unclear roles and functions of stakeholders at central and local government levels (Zimmermann, 2008). Public land is managed at various levels, from local municipalities up to the national government. Registers to bring the different levels together are often nonexistent, particularly in decentralized land management systems, which have been promoted in the name of inclusion and more efficient management (Alden Wily, 2003; Kleinbooi, de Satgé and Tanner, 2011). In many countries, the principle of 'State ownership' means that the state owns all unregistered land. Conducting a comprehensive land inventory is a lengthy, costly, and technically complex process, particularly for under-resourced countries with competing funding priorities.

Private lands are the most documented globally, as they require a title to be classified as such by definition. They account for 2.6 billion ha, approximately 20 percent of the world's land. The quality, legal strength, and currency of these records vary widely depending on national legal frameworks and land information systems. Of these private lands, 18 percent (2.4 billion ha) are held under private ownership, while another 2 percent (0.2 billion ha) operate as states' private assets.

Land documentation: a closer look at land holders

This area-based data only tells part of the story of land documentation. It does not reveal who actually holds legal recognition of their land rights. One way to fill this gap is through SDG indicator 1.4.2. This measures the share of a given country's adult population that possesses legally recognized documentation over land and perceives their tenure rights to be secure. The latest data shows that in 43 of the 63 countries assessed, fewer than half of the population have such documentation. In 14 countries, the figure is below 10 percent.

SDG 5.a.1, which focuses on the agricultural population, backs up the findings of SDG 1.4.2. Data from 49 countries between 2009 and 2023 reveals that a large share of the population involved in agricultural production lacks ownership or secure tenure rights over agricultural land. In 32 of the 49 countries, less than 50 percent of the agricultural population has ownership or secure rights over the land they rely on.

However, SDG data has limited country coverage. Survey-based data from Prindex (2024), which spans 108 countries, paints a broader picture: around 74 percent of adults live in households with formal documentation of their property rights (ownership, rental agreements, and other arrangements such as family-owned property).

This higher figure likely reflects differences in country coverage, mainly urban sampling methods, and the use of self-reported data, which is not verified (and potentially over-reported, according to Moore and Rutherfurd, 2020), versus administrative records (Huntington and Stevens, 2023).

State of tenure security and insecurity

Tenure security relates to people's confidence that their rights (formal or informal) will be upheld. As stated previously, possession of legally recognized documentation is just one measure of assessing the state of tenure security of a given population (Box 3.3).

Box 3.3

Tenure security beyond documentation

There are conflicting views on whether land formalization through titling is sufficient to achieve tenure security. Practitioners emphasize the importance of formal aspects of land tenure security (titling, legal recognition, and enforcement). They also note the impact of multiple additional factors, such as social and environmental issues (Masuda *et al.*, 2020). However, research increasingly suggests that the extent of formal documentation is an oversimplified measure and that more value should be placed on landholders' perceptions of tenure security (Cousins, 2002; Plessis, 2018).

As such, SDG 1.4.2 measures not just actual, but also perceived disparities in tenure security. The perception of security is shaped by people's experiences, which in turn influence their trust in their land tenure arrangements (UN Statistical Division, 2025). A range of contextual and historical factors, from environmental policy and political stability to market pressures, govern these perceptions (McLain, 2023). Data on perceptions thus allows a comparison of tenure security across diverse land governance systems, bundles of rights, and practices, going beyond the narrower definition of documentation alone (Prindex, 2024).

Sources: Authors' own elaboration based on sources listed in the References section.

Tenure insecurity: globally high, with certain regions being particularly affected

Examining the security of tenure rights through the dual lens of documentation and perception reveals a complex picture, with variations across regions, socio-economic factors, and legal systems.

Overall, based on the latest SDG 1.4.2 data available (from 85 countries), the share of the population with self-reported tenure security is 71.5 percent, which exceeds the average proportion in possession of documentation (from 63 countries) at 33.3 percent (UN Statistical Division, 2024). These results correspond to the Prindex 2024 global survey, in which ***23 percent of the adult population (approximately 1.1 billion people) stated that they considered it likely or very likely that they could lose the right to some or all of their land and housing property in the next five years***[3] (Box 3.4).

Box 3.4

Broadening the lens: global insights from Prindex on tenure security

Official data on people's perception of tenure security is limited – SDG indicator 1.4.2 reports data from only 27 countries. To address this gap, survey-based sources, such as Prindex, offer a broader perspective. Prindex collected data from 140 countries in 2020 and 108 countries in 2024, making it one of the most comprehensive sources on perceived tenure insecurity.

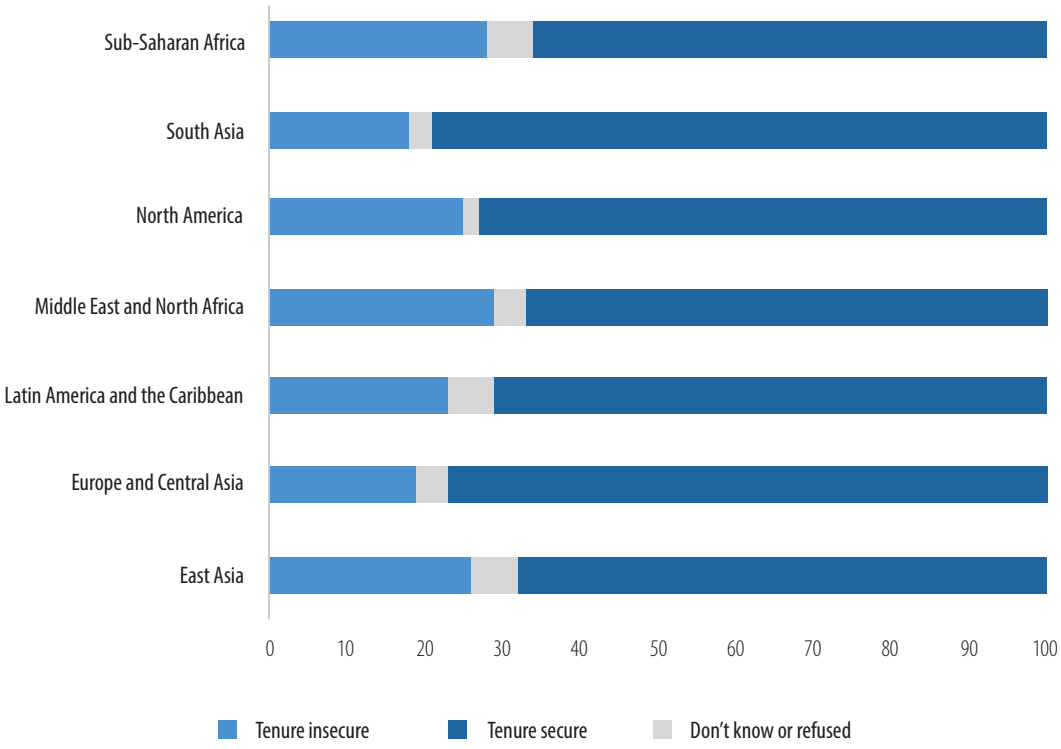
According to Prindex, 44 percent of respondents identify as owners or joint owners. The rest report living on property owned by family members (32 percent), renting (16 percent), or occupying land under other arrangements (8 percent). The broader country coverage and type of data collected through the survey (various modalities of documentation, tenure type, location, as well as respondents' reasons for tenure insecurity) allow Prindex to capture tenure security perceptions across a much wider segment of the global population.

Source: Authors' own elaboration based on Prindex. 2024. Prindex Comparative Report. Global Security of Property Rights. Prindex Initiative. ***https://prindex-dev-bucket.s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/documents/Prindex-Comparative_Report-2024_-_ENG_-_DIGITAL.pdf*** [Accessed on 26 May 2025]. and United Nations Statistical Division. 2025. SDG Indicators Database. ***https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/dataportal*** [Accessed on 26 May 2025].

3 Population-weighted global averages based on available reported data.

In terms of regions (Figure 3.3), overall tenure insecurity among the assessed population is highest in the Middle East and North Africa (29 percent), East Asia (26 percent), and sub-Saharan Africa (26 percent), while South Asia has the lowest level of insecurity (18 percent). With respect to the available country-level data, in 2024, the Philippines, Iran, and Jordan had the largest share of their adult population feeling insecure at 56 percent, 48 percent, and 46 percent, respectively. The lowest levels of tenure insecurity were recorded in Bulgaria (7 percent), Republic of Moldova (7 percent), and Lithuania (6 percent).

Figure 3.3. Percentage of adults who feel insecure and secure about all their land and housing property rights (2024)



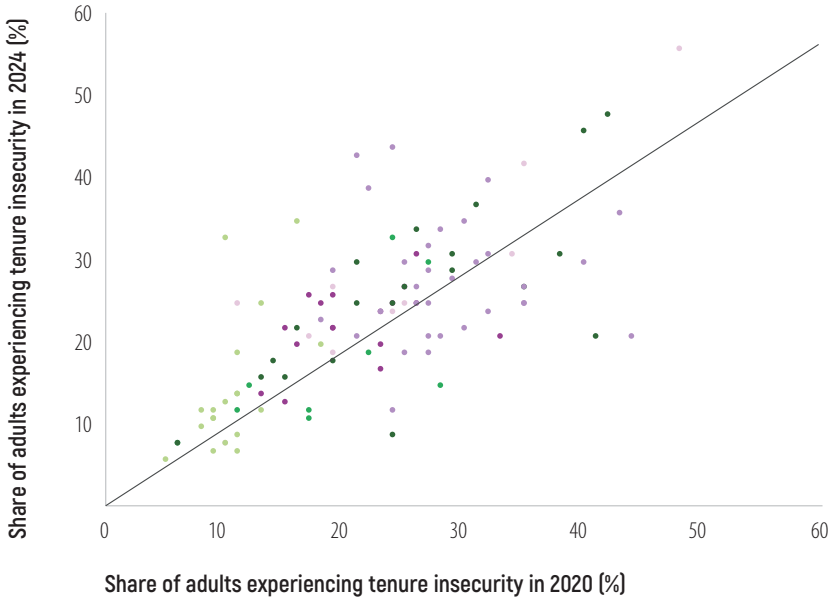
Note: Analysis is based on 108 countries covered in the 2024 Prindex survey, with regional aggregates following the World Bank classification ([Cited 26 September 2025]. ***https://ddh-openapi.worldbank.org/resources/DR0095333/download***). Unless otherwise specified, this report uses regional aggregates produced by the UN Statistical Division ([Cited 26 September 2025]. ***https://unstats.un.org/unsd/methodology/m49***). The discrepancy may affect some regions since the two categorizations do not include the same countries within the same regions, particularly in the Middle East, Central Asia and North Africa (World Bank classification) and Western Asia, Central Asia and Northern Africa, as per the UN Statistical Division regional aggregates.

Source: Prindex. 2024. Prindex Comparative Report: Global Security of Property Rights. Prindex Initiative. [Cited 26 September 2025]. ***https://prindex-dev-bucket.s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/documents/Prindex-Comparative_Report-2024_-_ENG_-_DIGITAL.pdf***

Land tenure insecurity is increasing

Between 2020 and 2024, the share of the global adult population who reported feeling insecure about their rights to land and housing property increased from 19 percent to 23 percent. As Prindex (2024) highlights, besides increased displacement, the most frequent cause of insecurity is related to the lack of financial resources, for example, to pay rent, mortgage, property tax or utilities. This likely reflects the fact that between the two rounds of data collection, the world had been impacted by a series of negative shocks, including the COVID-19 pandemic and numerous conflicts. Between 2019 and 2024, an additional 23 million people were pushed into extreme poverty, and by the end of 2023, 120 million people were forcibly displaced worldwide (UN, 2024).

Figure 3.4. Changes in tenure insecurity for any housing or land property (2020–2024)



Note: Analysis based on 108 countries that have been covered in both the 2020 and 2024 Prindex surveys.

Source: Authors' own elaboration based on data from Prindex. 2024. Prindex Comparative Report. Global Security of Property Rights. Prindex Initiative. [Cited 26 September 2025]. ***https://prindex-dev-bucket.s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/documents/Prindex-Comparative_Report-2024_-_ENG_-_DIGITAL.pdf***

Figure 3.4 displays changes in tenure insecurity for all surveyed countries. For 33 of 108 countries, a statistically significant increase in tenure insecurity, ranging from 2 to 23 percentage points, was noted between 2020 and 2024. By comparison, 24 countries showed a significant decrease in tenure insecurity, ranging from -3 to -23 percentage points. As highlighted by Prindex (2024), one important finding was a systematic increase in tenure insecurity in North America (a 12 percentage point increase), East Asia (an 11 percentage point increase), and Europe and Central Asia (a 6 percentage point increase). Latin America and Caribbean countries also showed a 2 percentage point increase. These increases in perceived tenure insecurity are primarily observed in high-income countries (a 6 percentage point overall increase) and upper-middle-income countries (a 9 percentage point increase). Most of these countries had relatively low levels of tenure insecurity in the 2020 round of the survey, but are presently more affected by financial instabilities, negatively impacting tenure security.

Tenure security for all? Diverse patterns of tenure insecurity

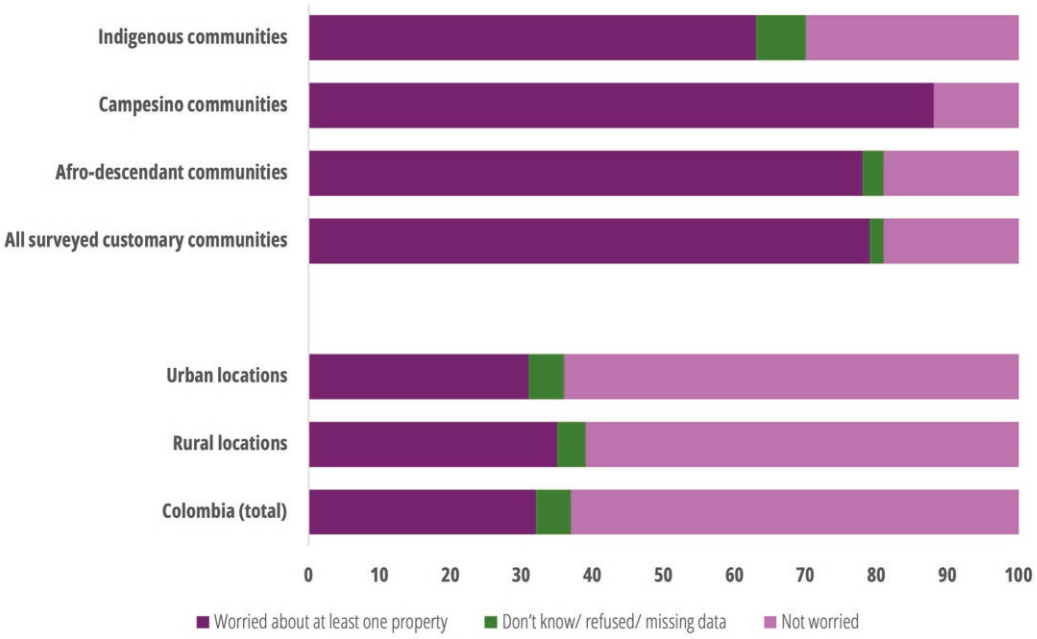
The above rates of tenure security and insecurity are national averages and do not reflect social and cultural specificities within these countries.

Customary communities

Customary communities often experience significant land insecurity due to a combination of historical injustices, ongoing conflict, and unequal land distribution. Despite legal frameworks recognizing their collective land rights, communities face challenges in obtaining and maintaining land ownership and benefiting from it (Kasimbazi, 2017).

This is confirmed by a pilot study in 2020–21 which covered five customary communities in Colombia: two *campesino* ('farmer' or 'peasant') communities, two Afro-descendant communities, and one Indigenous Peoples' community. Using the Prindex methodology, the study highlighted differences in perceived individual and collective tenure security between these communities and national averages. Seventy-nine percent of surveyed customary communities were concerned about losing at least one property, compared to the national average of 32 (Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, ILC and Prindex, 2022) (Figure 3.5).

Figure 3.5. Percentage of adults in various customary settings in Colombia who are worried about at least one plot of land or property



Source: Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, ILC and Prindex. unpublished. A comparative case study of security of land and property rights for Indigenous Peoples and local communities in Colombia (2022).

While the conclusions and lessons from the pilot study cannot be extrapolated to other contexts, a few findings with broader implications emerge (Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, ILC and Prindex, 2022):

- Among these groups, tenure security is significantly lower than in a nationally representative sample.
- Drivers of (in)security are different between these communities and landholders under other tenure regimes.
- There can be significant variation between types of communities in terms of levels of tenure (in)security driven by legal recognition and possession of formal documentation, as well as by other local institutional and contextual aspects. Differences in tenure security levels are particularly pronounced between the campesino communities (86 percent of perceived insecurity) and the Indigenous Peoples' (63 percent) and Afro-descendant (76 percent) communities, which may be attributed to the prevalence of different tenure types and past experiences of evictions.
- The level of tenure insecurity appears to be lower for collective rights than for personal rights to land and property within customary settings, especially in the case of the Indigenous Peoples' and Afro-descendant communities. As Kasimbazi (2017) and Larson *et al.* (2023) state, in many customary settings, collective rights are considered more secure than individual rights because they are rooted in shared community practices and traditions, allowing for greater social cohesion and mutual support.

These findings confirm existing research (FAO and FILAC, 2021; Holland *et al.*, 2022; Sander *et al.*, 2025), highlighting the complexities and specificities of land tenure systems, particularly in customary ones, needing tailored support interventions and policies. This also applies to pastoral communities (see Box 3.5).

Box 3.5

Pastoralism – between flexible territorial boundaries and increased land security

In Kenya, the National Land Policy of 2009 acknowledges pastoralism as a legitimate land use and advocates for flexible cross-boundary access to essential resources. The Community Land Act of 2016 encourages the registration of community/trust lands, both collectively and individually. A case study in the Waldaa community in Marsabit County, Kenya, showed the complexity of pastoral collective tenure and the degree of tenure security experienced by pastoralists by examining tenure security at both group and individual levels.

Even though they did not hold any formal documentation, community members expressed high confidence in mobility security within the area, underscoring the role that traditional land use and governance practices can play in instilling confidence in the communities. The community has well-established mobility patterns and land use practices to ensure sustainable resource use, as well as effective traditional leadership that aids in conflict resolution. Despite that, the community is concerned about their lack of legal recognition, prioritizing full land registration to increase security and recognition at the national level. Community members fear losing their rights to benefit from the collective grazing land if the land registration is not completed, due to competing claims to the land from neighbouring communities or the government. The potential competition for land, which can increase tenure insecurity, has become more pronounced as weather changes impact the viability of pastoral practices and the population increases.

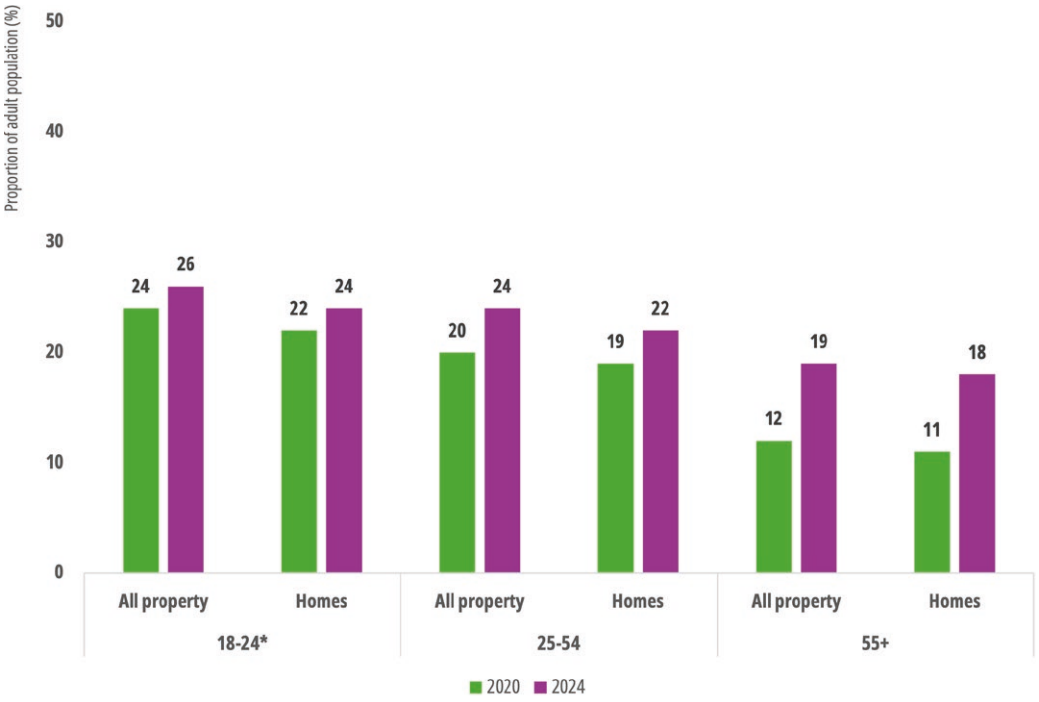
Source: Authors' own elaboration based on Otieno, K., Lumumba, O., Odote, C., Akinyi, L., Wari, G., Ongesa, L. & Nassef, M. 2024. Perceptions of land tenure security in pastoral areas in Marsabit, Kenya. SPARC. [Cited 26 September 2025]. ***https://www.sparc-knowledge.org/publications-resources/perceptions-land-tenure-security-marsabit-kenya***

Youth and insecurity

Youth access to land is hindered by barriers such as delayed inheritance of land, land fragmentation resulting from intergenerational subdivision, rising land prices, and limited access to capital (IFAD, 2014; Land Tenure and Development Technical Committee, 2020; FAO, 2025).

Beyond limited access to land, youth also experience higher tenure insecurity. Prindex (2024) shows that across all tenure arrangements, youth landholders (aged 15–24) and younger adult landholders (aged 25–54) experience greater tenure insecurity compared to landowners over 55 years old (Figure 3.6). The narrowing difference between age categories over time is related to an increasing perception of insecurity in 2024 in the older age groups.

Figure 3.6. Proportion of adult population that feels tenure insecure, disaggregated by age group



Note: The results for respondents in the 25–54-year-old and 55 and older age brackets are statistically significant at the 99 percent level. The results on growing tenure insecurity in the 18–24-year-old age group are not statistically significant. Limited sample size places constraints on the disaggregation of results.

Source: Reproduced from Prindex. 2024. Prindex Comparative Report. Global Security of Property Rights. Prindex Initiative. [Cited 26 September 2025]. ***https://prindex-dev-bucket.s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/documents/Prindex-Comparative_Report-2024_-_ENG_-_DIGITAL.pdf***

Additionally, youth voices are often excluded from governance structures and decision-making processes related to land matters at all levels, including land reforms and large-scale land sales (FAO, 2025). Qualitative research from several countries and large-scale land acquisition cases reveals that young people often express frustration about land negotiations, which are dominated by local chiefs and government officials, with some input from their parents.

At the same time, youth are rarely included (FAO, 2025). Evolving contexts, particularly in customary settings, can lead to land insecurity (Zakout *et al.*, 2006), but can also imply the restructuring of practices, processes, institutions, and power dynamics over land. In a case study from Northern Uganda, Kobusingye (2020), as cited in FAO (2025), describes how conflict weakened customary institutions and strengthened the power of young men to assert their claims over land, often undermining the influence of elders and traditional authorities.

What drives tenure (in)security?

Overall, in the broader literature, extrinsic drivers of land insecurity include, among others, weak land governance and rule of law (Prosterman, 2013; International Development Law Organization [IDLO], 2022) (Box 3.6); armed conflict, political instability, corruption, and entrenched power interests (Unruh and Shalaby, 2022; McLain, 2023); pressures related to population growth and urbanization (Mwesigye, Matsumoto and Otsuka, 2017; Haagsma and Mouche, 2020); commodification, commercialization, and financialization of land (Li, 2014; Clapp and Isakson, 2018); and climate change and climate-related disasters (IDLO, 2022). More intrinsic drivers of tenure insecurity relate to the lack of recognition, documentation, and the tenure system in place within a country (McLain, 2023).

Box 3.6

Governance and the Rule of Law in tenure security

As noted earlier, tenure security is shaped by a complex interplay of factors, including broader national conditions such as the transparency and efficiency of governance and the capacity of institutions to implement and enforce land rights frameworks. These external factors play a critical role in determining how secure people feel in practice, regardless of their formal documentation status.

One useful aggregate measure that captures various aspects of governance, such as regulatory enforcement, corruption control, and adherence to the rule of law, is the World Justice Project (WJP) Rule of Law Index (2024). This index assesses 142 countries using 44 variables to evaluate how effectively countries uphold the rule of law.

While the WJP Rule of Law Index and tenure security as measured by SDG indicator 1.4.2 (UN Statistical Division, 2025) do not have a statistically significant relationship, the relationship becomes significant when examining

perceptions of tenure security with the Prindex dataset (Prindex, 2024). This suggests that effective governance and institutional trust may play a more influential role in shaping how secure people feel about their land rights than whether they hold formal documentation. As highlighted above, the R^2 of 14 percent confirms that other variables, including political, cultural, economic, and historical ones, also matter significantly.

In conclusion, to improve people's actual experience of tenure security, strengthening the rule of law and institutional capacity may have an even greater impact than the issuance of formal land titles.

Figure A. Rule of Law index and measures of tenure security

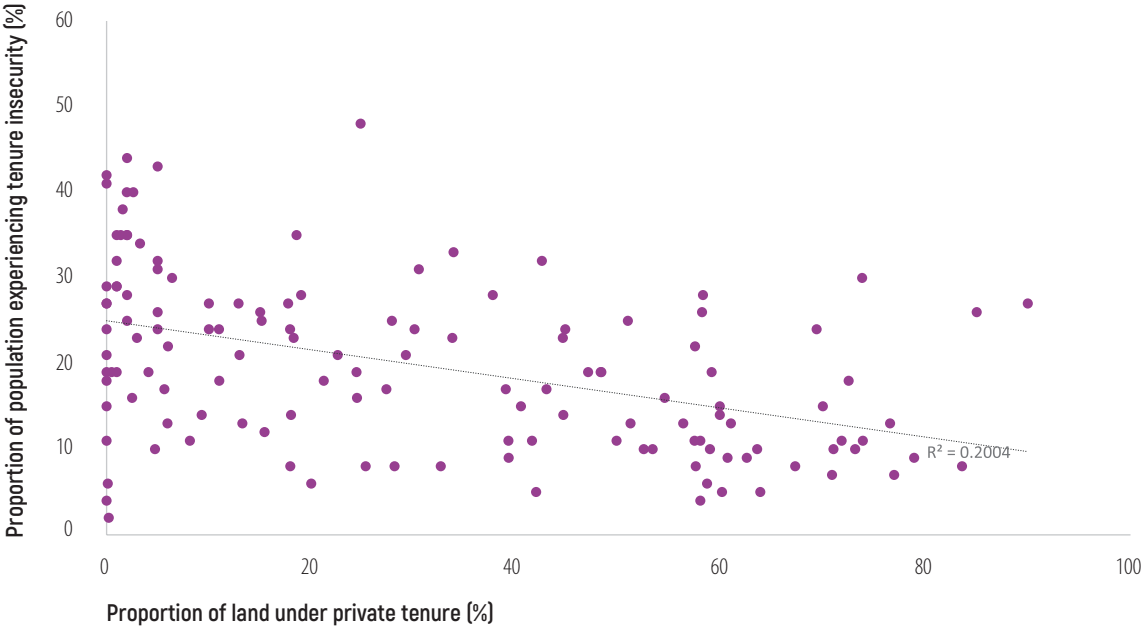
Source (figure): Authors' own elaboration based on Prindex 2024. Prindex Comparative Report. Global Security of Property Rights. Prindex Initiative. [Cited 26 September 2025]. ***https://prindex-dev-bucket.s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/documents/Prindex-Comparative_ Report-2024_-_ENG_-_DIGITAL.pdf*** and World Justice Project. 2024. WJP Rule of Law Index ***https://worldjusticeproject.org/rule-of-law-index*** [Cited on 3 June 2025].

Source: Authors' own elaboration based on sources listed in the References section.

Type of property

The type of tenure system in place within a country can significantly shape how secure people feel about their land rights, as different systems offer varying levels of legal protection. Overall, as shown in Figure 3.7, countries with a higher share of land under private tenure tend to have a higher proportion of the population reporting perceived tenure security. People who own property report the lowest levels of insecurity (12 percent), followed by those living on family-owned land (23 percent). In contrast, insecurity is highest among renters, with 35 percent reporting feeling insecure (see Figure 3.8).

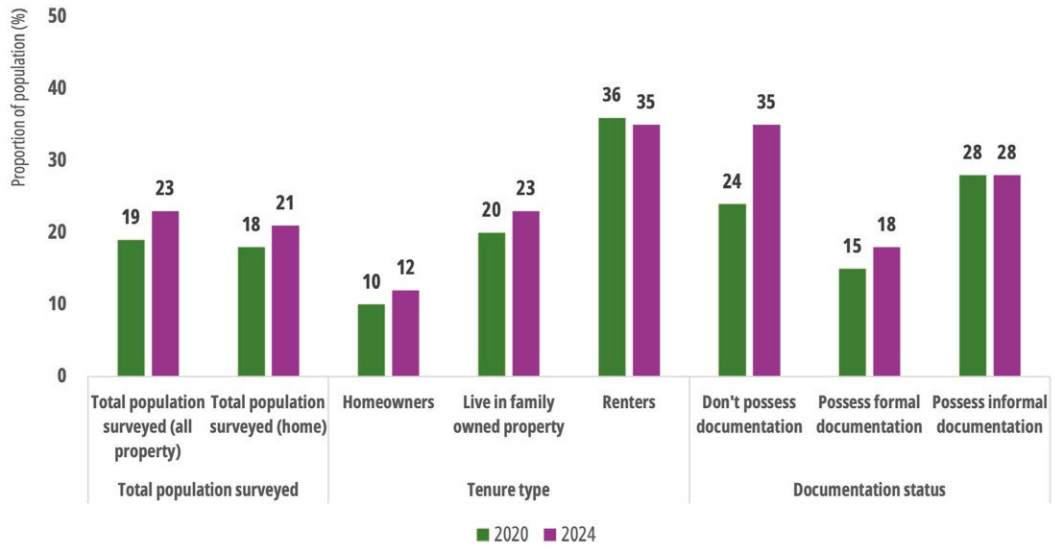
Figure 3.7. Prevalence of private tenure versus tenure insecurity



Note: The figure represents 91 countries for which data on perceptions of tenure security and reliable information on the prevalence of rural and urban private land tenure are available.

Source: Authors' own elaboration using tenure data gathered for this report (Appendix 3) and Prindex. 2024. Prindex Comparative Report. Global Security of Property Rights. Prindex Initiative. ***https://prindex-dev-bucket.s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/documents/Prindex-Comparative_Report-2024_-_ENG_-_DIGITAL.pdf*** [Accessed on: 26 September 2025].

Figure 3.8. Proportion of total population surveyed experiencing tenure insecurity



Note: The analysis is based on Prindex for 140 countries for 2020 and 108 countries for 2024 Prindex. The changes in tenure insecurity between 2020 and 2024 are statistically significant across all disaggregations in *Figure 3.8* above, except renters and those possessing informal documentation.

Source: Reproduced from Prindex. 2024. Prindex Comparative Report. Global Security of Property Rights. Prindex Initiative. [Cited 26 September 2025]. ***https://prindex-dev-bucket.s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/documents/Prindex-Comparative_Report-2024_-_ENG_-_DIGITAL.pdf***

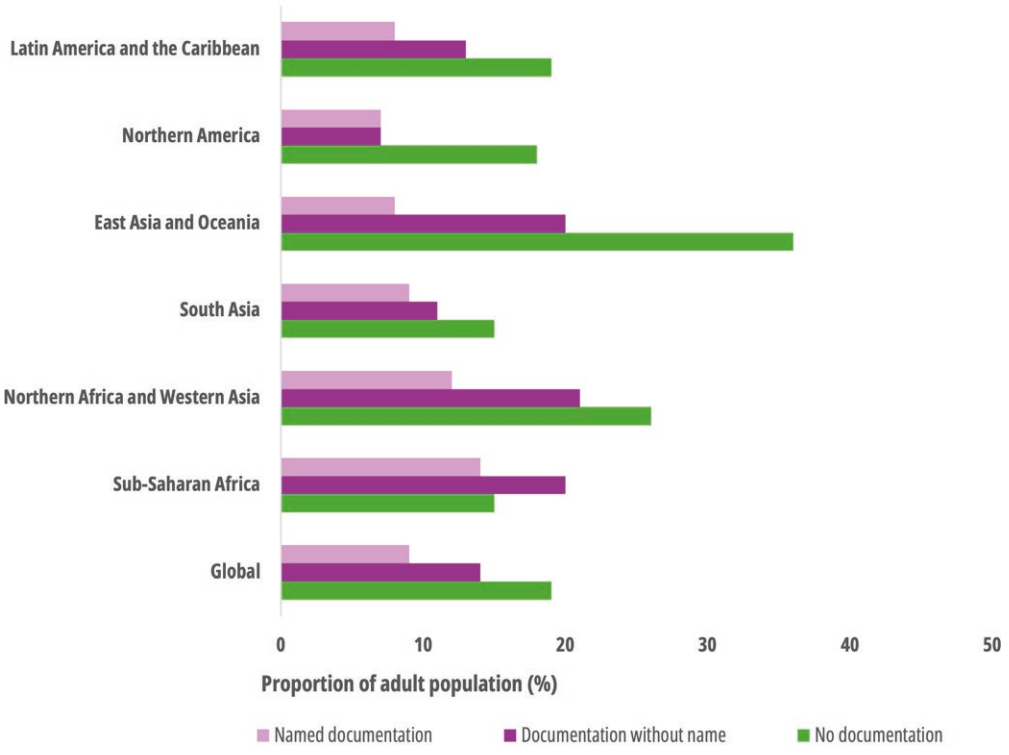
Documentation also plays a critical role. People with formal documentation report the lowest tenure insecurity (18 percent), compared to those with informal documents (28 percent) and those without any documentation (35 percent). Clearly, both the presence and type of documentation significantly affect how secure people feel.

Although the increase in tenure insecurity from 19 percent in 2020 to 23 percent in 2024 occurred across all tenure types, the most dramatic increase appeared to be among those without any documentation (up from 24 percent in 2020 to 35 percent in 2024). This points to growing vulnerability among populations already at risk.

What's in a name? The importance of named recognition

Figure 3.9 highlights that among property owners, both the presence and type of formal documentation significantly impact perceived tenure security. Individuals living in households with formal documents that explicitly name them as rights-holders report the lowest levels of tenure insecurity. This reflects a strong form of formal security. By contrast, those living in households with formal documentation that does not include their name consistently report higher levels of insecurity. This suggests that merely having documents in the household is not enough; personal identification on those documents matters.

Figure 3.9. Tenure insecurity by possession of formal documents among owners



Note: Analysis based on Prindex, covering 108 countries with population weights, with regional aggregates following the World Bank classification ***https://ddh-openapi.worldbank.org/resources/DR0095333/download***. This discrepancy may affect some regions since, unless otherwise specified, the report uses the regional aggregates produced by the UN Statistical Division, ***https://unstats.un.org/unsd/methodology/m49/***.

Source: Authors' own elaboration based on Prindex. 2024. Prindex Comparative Report. Global Security of Property Rights. Prindex Initiative. ***https://prindex-dev-bucket.s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/documents/Prindex-Comparative_Report-2024_-_ENG_-_DIGITAL.pdf*** [Accessed on: 26 September 2025].

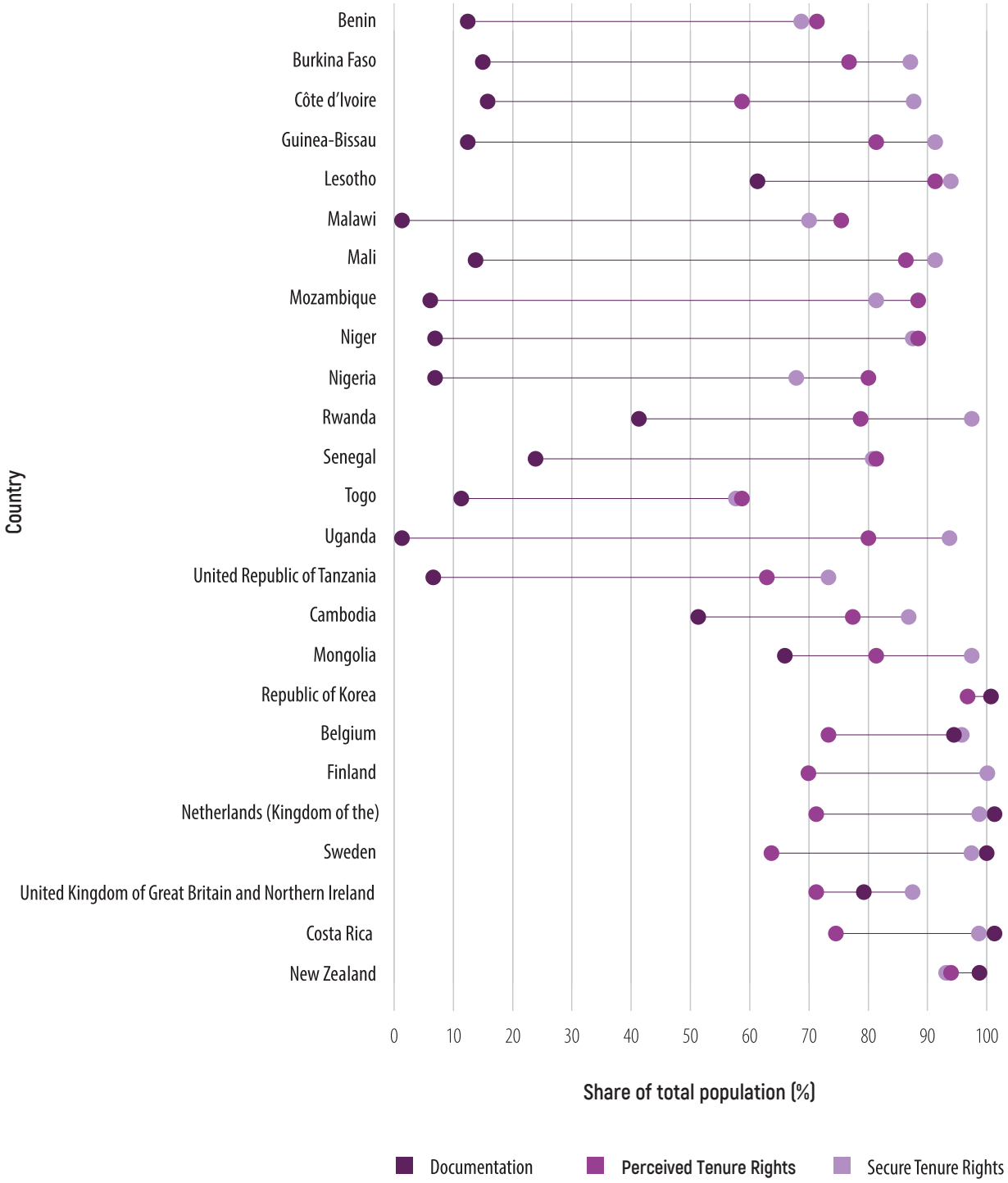
Two regional patterns stand out. In sub-Saharan Africa, individuals with named documentation report similar levels of tenure insecurity to those without any documentation, possibly indicating that documentation plays a limited role in securing rights in practice. Conversely, in East Asia, those without any documentation report the highest levels of tenure insecurity across all regions, emphasizing a stronger reliance on formal documentation for perceived security.

Customary and collective lands and (in)security

Despite low rates of land documentation in many countries, a large share of the population reports feeling secure in their land tenure. The gap is especially noticeable in sub-Saharan Africa, where formal documentation is limited; yet, people often report relatively high levels of perceived tenure security. In Côte d'Ivoire, for example, only about 15 percent of landholders possess documented land rights; yet, 88 percent of the surveyed respondents perceive their rights to be secure (Figure 3.10). Customary land ownership, whether collective or individual, even if not documented, can enhance land security. The effect is notable where formal individual land titles are not the norm or are insufficient (Ostrom, 1990; Kaur, Chang and Andersson, 2023).

In several high-income countries (such as the Republic of Korea, the Kingdom of the Netherlands, Belgium, New Zealand and Sweden), where documentation rates are around 100 percent, perception of tenure security is lower than documentation rates suggest (Figure 3.10). This points to the influence of other factors, whether legal, social or economic – and presently, as highlighted by Prindex, often financial – shape how secure people feel about their land rights, even when formal documents exist.

Figure 3.10. Proportion of people with tenure security (documentation, perception and experience of tenure security)



Note: Latest values from 25 countries, where all three series of SDG 1.4.2 are reported to allow comparison across measures composing the indicator.

Source: United Nations Statistical Division. 2025. SDG Indicators Database. ***https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/dataportal*** [Accessed on 26 May 2025].

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

Chapter 4

WOMEN'S LAND RIGHTS AND TENURE SECURITY: A GLOBAL ASSESSMENT

> Gender is a key determinant of land tenure security. Worsening tenure insecurity and insecure tenure rights disproportionately affect women as well as other groups living in conditions of vulnerability, exacerbating existing inequalities (OHCHR, 2017).

Limited access to land reduces women's employment opportunities and decision-making power over family and community affairs while increasing their unpaid work, further reinforcing gender inequality (Meinzen-Dick *et al.*, 2019). Although still far from sufficient, the available evidence – from formal as well as complementary (mainly citizen-led and community-based) sources – presently enables better documentation of women's land rights. The evidence shows notable regional and contextual variations (Slavchevska *et al.*, 2025; Ali, Deininger and Goldstein, 2014; Goldstein *et al.*, 2018).

By bringing together various data sources, this chapter provides a comprehensive analysis of women's land rights, integrating legal and statistical data with case studies to assess the status of women's land ownership and tenure security. It also examines the multifaceted barriers – both legal and non-legal – to gender equality.

Women's land rights recognized as fundamental

The importance of securing women's land rights is firmly established in international and human rights law, as well as in the global development agenda. Key instruments include the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, the Committee on World Food Security's Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure (VGGT), and the Voluntary Guidelines on Gender Equality and Women's and Girls' Empowerment in the context of Food and Nutrition Security (VGGEWGE). Regional frameworks also affirm this priority. Examples include the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa, the Inter-American Convention on the Prevention, Punishment, and Eradication of Violence against Women and the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. These instruments call for eliminating all forms of discrimination against women in laws, policies, and practices.

Two UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 5: Gender Equality and SDG 1: No Poverty) contain specific targets related to women's land rights. Target 5.a calls for reforms to recognize women's equal rights to economic resources, as well as access to ownership and control over land and other forms of property. Target 1.4 aims to ensure that all men and women, particularly those living in poor and vulnerable conditions, have equal rights to economic resources, including land.

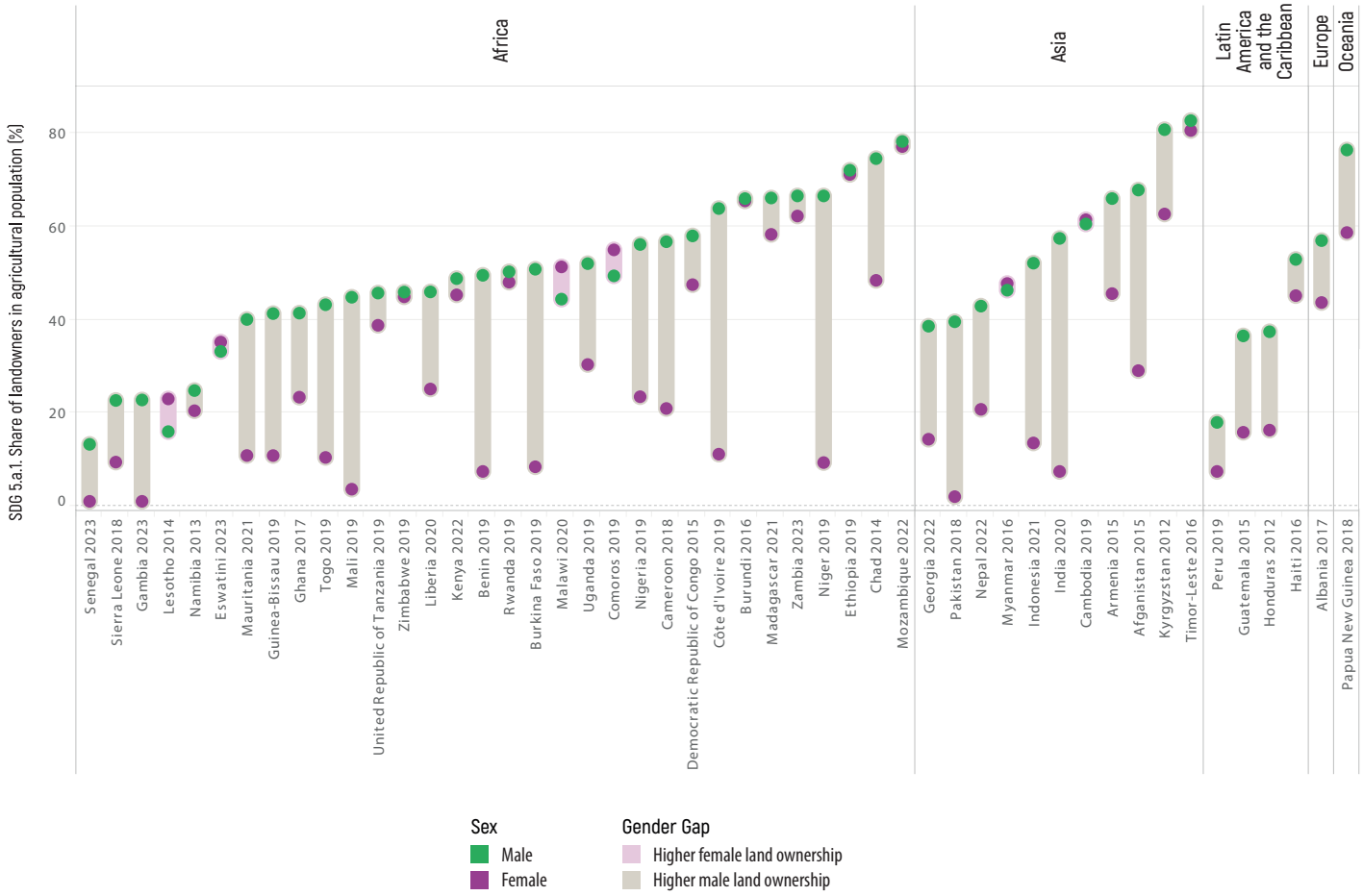
However, these international instruments and frameworks often fail to ensure women's land rights in practice. Worldwide, women remain disadvantaged in accessing, controlling, and owning land, including agricultural land (Deere, Alvarado and Twyman, 2012; Doss *et al.*, 2015; Kieran *et al.*, 2015; FAO, 2023). In some countries, significant gender gaps persist despite legal provisions that guarantee women's land rights, while in others, national laws have inadequate safeguards for women's land rights, or none at all (Slavchevska *et al.*, 2025). A significant factor behind weak legal protection is that women's land rights are deeply interconnected with longstanding religious beliefs, cultural practices, and social norms. Changing such beliefs, practices, and norms is difficult. Together with gender, these intersectional factors shape how land tenure insecurity is experienced. In particular, young women, women from Indigenous Peoples, and other groups living in conditions of marginalization, often face overlapping and mutually reinforcing barriers. However, data on these intersections remain sparse, highlighting a critical area for future research and policy attention.

Solid, cross-national evidence is crucial to inform and support legal and policy reform (Deininger, 2017; Ali *et al.*, 2019) and help address the complex and intertwined barriers to realizing women's land rights. A major impediment, however, is the general lack of reliable data on land tenure law and governance (Deininger, 2017; Fletschner, Deo and Mhoja, 2022). An especially acute gap concerns women's land rights, where information is often unreliable and inconsistently collected. Illustrative of these shortcomings is, for example, the limited timeframes for measurement that obscure the real, long-term effects, particularly important in the case of women's land rights. Additionally, land governance and tenure security data often fail to disaggregate by gender (Doss *et al.*, 2015), limiting the ability to fully understand and address gender disparities.

The status of women's land ownership and tenure security

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. Reported ownership declined since 2020, falling by 7 percentage points for women and 3 percentage points for men (Prindex, 2024). 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. SDG indicator 5.a.1 tracks land ownership among agricultural households, and in 43 of 49 countries with data, men are more likely than women to own or have secure land rights. In nearly half of these countries, the gender gap exceeds 20 percentage points (Figure 4.1).

Figure 4.1. Share of women and men in the adult agricultural population with ownership or secure tenure rights



Source: Authors' own elaboration based on official reports for SDG indicator 5.a.1: (a) Proportion of total agricultural population with ownership or secure rights over agricultural land, by sex. UN Statistical Division. 2025. SDG Indicators Database ***https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/dataportal*** [Accessed on 26 May 2025].

In only six countries (Lesotho, Malawi, the Comoros, Eswatini, Cambodia, and Myanmar), women in agricultural households report higher land ownership than men, though the differences are often minimal.

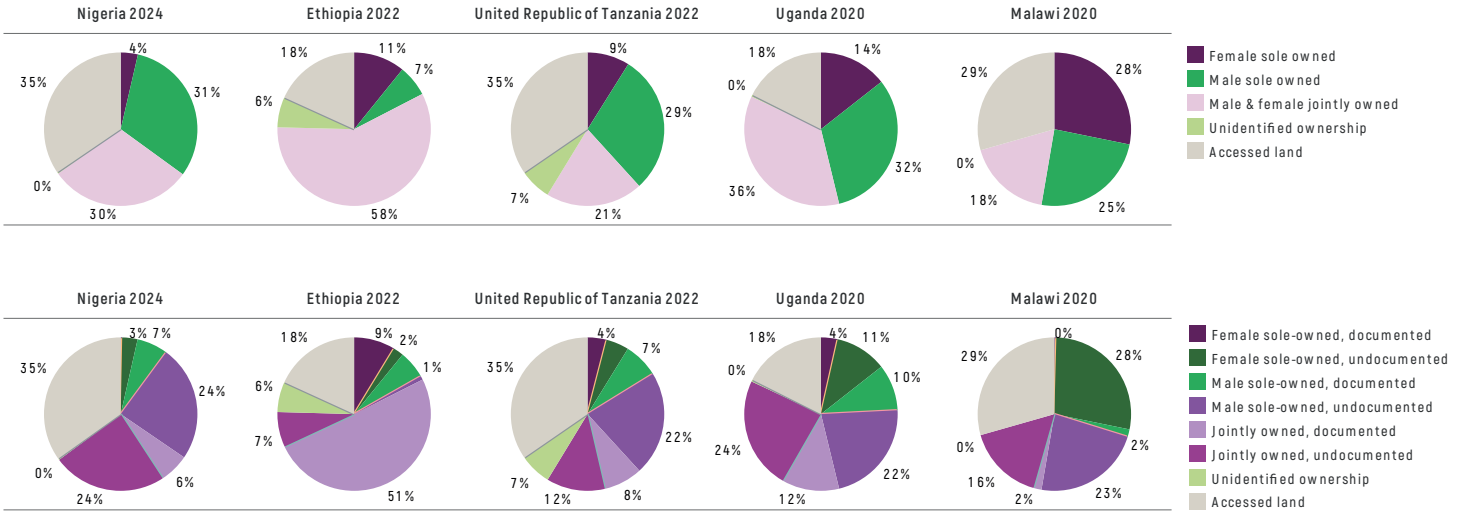
Each of these countries has a set of context-specific characteristics that may account for the patterns. In Cambodia, for example, most land is jointly owned due to civil code provisions treating assets acquired during marriage as joint property (Van Der Keur, 2014; Hasanbasri *et al.*, 2021a). In some regions of Malawi, matrilineal customs support women's land rights, though patrilineal systems dominate nationally. In Myanmar, where land tenure remains insecure due to weak legal implementation, conflicting laws, and limited recognition of customary systems (Ingalls *et al.*, 2018), women often perceive themselves as having equal rights to land as men (Akter *et al.*, 2017). However, documented land rights are mostly in men's names, and social norms often hinder women's sole or joint ownership (Lambrecht *et al.*, 2023). Customary and religious practices strongly influence land rights, and existing data may not fully reflect women's access under these systems. The situation might have worsened since the 2021 military coup.

Globally, women typically own a much smaller share of total agricultural land, both jointly and solely, than men (Figure 4.2). In the United Republic of Tanzania, Uganda, and Nigeria, this gap is especially pronounced in sole ownership. For example, in Nigeria, women solely own just 4 percent of agricultural land, compared to 31 percent solely owned by men. In the United Republic of Tanzania and Uganda, women are sole owners of 9 and 14 percent of the land, respectively, while men own around 30 percent (Figure 4.2). Malawi and Ethiopia stand out, with women owning similar or slightly larger shares of land as sole owners than men. In Malawi, women own 28 percent of land compared with 25 percent for men. In Ethiopia, women solely own 11 percent compared with 7 percent for men.

Joint ownership plays a crucial role in improving women's access to land, particularly in contexts where sole ownership by women remains limited. The prevalence of joint ownership varies significantly across countries with available data. In Nigeria, 30 percent of the total household land is jointly owned by women and men, whereas in Ethiopia, the figure is 58 percent, compared to only 11 percent of the land solely owned by women.

A comprehensive analysis of land tenure must also account for tenure security, as both men and women can feel insecure about land rights even when they own the land. For women in particular, insecurity often stems from undocumented or incomplete rights, short or uncertain durations of these rights, weak enforcement, discriminatory norms, and limited legal awareness. Even when women have rights to land, social relationships, institutional weaknesses, and overlapping legal systems can constrain women's ability to exercise them (Doss and Meinzen-Dick, 2020).

Figure 4.2. Proportion of household land area accessed or owned by women (%)



Note: The analysis uses data from the latest rounds of the Living Standards Measurement Study-Integrated Surveys on Agriculture (LSMS-ISA): Ethiopia (2021–2022), Malawi (2019–2020), Nigeria (2023–2024), United Republic of Tanzania (2020–2022), and Uganda (2019–2020). They update the figures in Doss *et al.* (2015). The plot area is constructed using GPS and the farmers' own estimates, which are then converted to acres. Landowners are defined using proxies such as documentation and alienation rights to sell and bequeath land in line with the methodology for SDG 5.a.1. The shares of land owned by men and women are calculated based on the total agricultural land owned or accessed by individuals in primarily agricultural households. The estimates are weighted to account for the complex survey design.

Source: Authors' own elaboration based on updated findings from Doss, C., Kovarik, C., Peterman, A., Quisumbing, A. and van den Bold, M. 2015. Gender inequalities in ownership and control of land in Africa: myth and reality. Agricultural Economics, 46(3): 403–434. ***https://doi.org/10.1111/agec.12171***

Sex-disaggregated data from SDG indicator 1.4.2 and the Prindex database highlight these disparities in both perceived tenure security and documentation of land rights. As discussed in Chapters 2 and 3, both initiatives address land tenure security. However, they differ in their methodologies, data sources, and coverage. SDG 1.4.2 measures the share of adults with secure land tenure based on both legal documentation and perceived security. It draws on diverse sources, including national surveys, census data, and administrative records, which can vary significantly across countries. As of 2025, 63 countries have data on the share of adults who own property and possess documentation to prove ownership (Figure 4.3).

Of these, 47 provide sex-disaggregated data[4]. In contrast, only 27 countries report data on perceived tenure insecurity, with just 15 offering sex-disaggregated statistics. Given this limited coverage of the second sub-indicator, this chapter draws on SDG 1.4.2 to examine the incidence of documented land ownership. It uses Prindex data to assess perceived tenure insecurity. Prindex uses a standardized survey tool, implemented through the Gallup World Poll in 140 countries, to measure perceived tenure security across various tenure types, including owners and renters.

4 Fifty-one countries reported some sex-disaggregated information. However, four were excluded due to conflicting estimates of documented land ownership among women and the general population, likely resulting from the use of different data sources.

Figure 4.3. Proportion of total adult population with legally recognized documentation for landownership (disaggregated by sex)

Note: Fifty-one countries have some disaggregated data; however, four were excluded from the analyses due to data discrepancies.

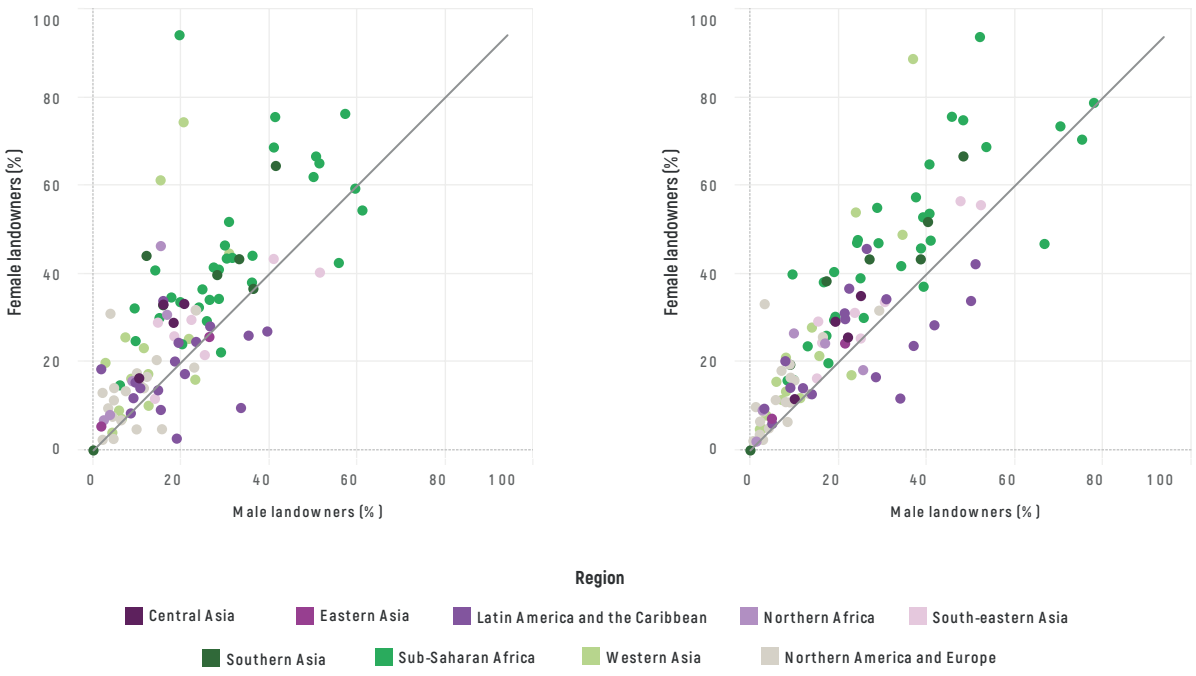
Source: Authors' own elaboration based on official reports for SDG indicator 1.4.2, sub-indicator (a) the proportion of the total adult population with legally recognized documentation. UN Statistical Division. 2025. SDG Indicators Database. [Accessed on 26 May 2025]. ***https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/dataportal*** [Accessed on 3 March 2025].

This chapter focuses specifically on landowners, excluding individuals who rent or reside in family homes with permission, as the nature of tenure insecurity – and the legal protections available to renters and other non-owning occupants – differs significantly and is beyond the scope of this chapter.

In the 47 countries with available data on SDG 1.4.2 (sub-indicator a), women are consistently less likely than men to hold legally documented land ownership. The share of adults with such documentation varies widely across regions, with sub-Saharan Africa showing particularly low overall rates. Rwanda and Ethiopia stand out, with approximately 40 percent of adults having legally recognized land documents for at least some part of their land, although gender disparities persist. Both countries have implemented large-scale land certification programmes (Bayisenge, 2018; Holden, 2021), which may help explain their comparatively higher rates. While documented land ownership is relatively common in many European countries, publicly available sex-disaggregated data are limited and inconsistently collected.

For women, having ownership documents does not always mean having tenure security. Many worry about losing property rights due to divorce or the death of a spouse, showing how gender affects perceptions of tenure security. Globally, female landowners are significantly more likely to report tenure insecurity compared to male owners. When asked about their rights in hypothetical situations like divorce or the death of a spouse, this disparity becomes evident (Figure 4.4).

Figure 4.4. Share of adults who are insecure about their property in the case of divorce and spousal death, by region



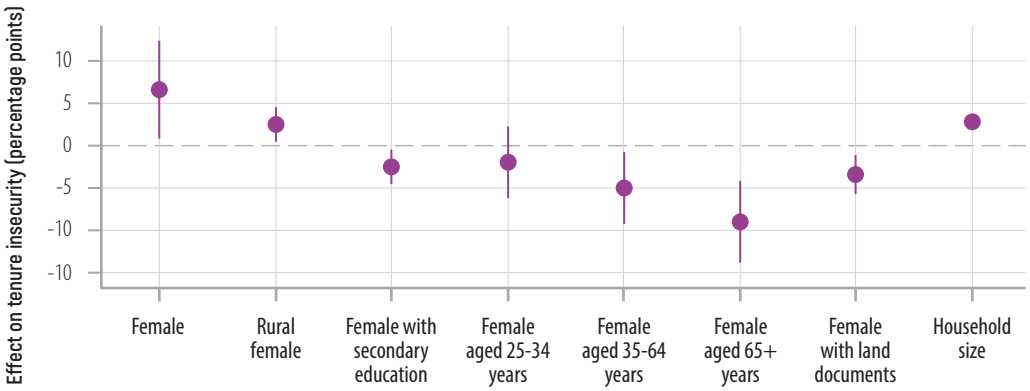
Note: The statistics are based on a sub-sample of married men and women who self-identify as property owners. Renters and individuals staying in a family home are excluded.

Source: Authors' own elaboration based on Prindex. 2024. Prindex Comparative Report. Global Security of Property Rights. Prindex Initiative. [Cited 26 May 2025]. ***https://prindex-dev-bucket.s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/documents/Prindex-Comparative_Report-2024_-_ENG_-_DIGITAL.pdf***

The disparity is particularly pronounced in countries across sub-Saharan Africa, Southern Asia, South-eastern Asia, and Western Asia. Although the patterns observed in cases of divorce and spousal death show similarities, there remains considerable variation across countries. The gender gap in tenure insecurity in the event of divorce or spousal death among landowners tends to decrease and even close with economic development (see Box 4.1).

Figure 4.5 and Box 4.1 show how tenure insecurity varies by socio-economic status and other social and demographic characteristics. Tenure insecurity in the case of divorce or spousal death is notably higher among rural women and women in larger households. Women over 35 years old feel significantly more tenure secure than those aged 15 to 24 or 25 to 34, who feel equally insecure. Additionally, women with secondary or higher education are less likely to worry about losing their main property or agricultural land, reflecting greater bargaining power and awareness of land rights. Holding formal ownership documents also reduces women's perceived tenure insecurity, although it does not eliminate it, as highlighted above.

Figure 4.5. Tenure security disaggregated by socio-economic and demographic factors



Note: The two waves of Prindex data, from 2020 and 2024, are combined. The figure displays coefficients from a linear regression estimating the relationship between respondents' demographic characteristics and tenure insecurity. The dependent variable is an indicator equal to one if the respondent reports worry about losing the main property in the event of divorce or spousal death. Coefficients reflect changes in the probability of expressing such concern/reporting tenure insecurity, relative to a reference group. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals. The model includes country and year fixed effects. The estimates are weighted to account for the survey design.

Source: Authors' own elaboration based on data from the Prindex initiative. Prindex. 2024. Prindex Comparative Report. Global Security of Property Rights. Prindex Initiative. ***https://prindex-dev-bucket.s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/documents/Prindex-Comparative_Report-2024_-_ENG_-_DIGITAL.pdf***

Box 4.1

Does the gender gap in land rights narrow at higher levels of economic development?

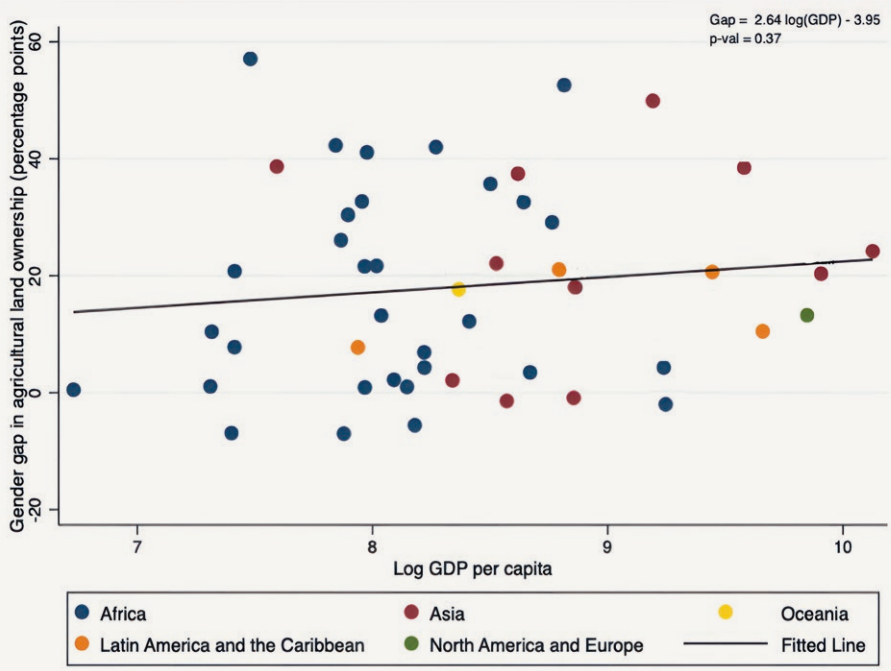
The relationship between economic development and women's land rights is ambiguous. Here, we look at how the gender gap in different aspects of land rights varies as national economies grow, measured by the gross domestic product per capita (GDP per capita).

The gender gap in agricultural land ownership does not narrow with rising levels of development. However, the incidence of agricultural land ownership declines for both men and women as economies grow, consistent with the declining importance of agriculture in the livelihoods of both men and women. Figure A1 depicts the incidence of agricultural land ownership among men and among women for countries at different levels of development measured by the (log) GDP per capita. Across all development levels, agricultural land ownership is more prevalent among men than women, and the gender gap remains unchanged with economic development. However, the SDG 5.a.1 data are limited, as the dataset does not include observations from high-income economies, which constrains the understanding of the gender gap in agricultural land ownership in higher-income countries. Statistics on farm management suggest that in higher-income countries, women constitute a minority of farm managers and operators. For example, the 2017 US Census of Agriculture revealed that women were involved in the operation of 56 percent of all farms; however, they made up only 29 percent of all principal farm operators, who are mainly responsible for daily farm management (Joseph *et al.*, 2024). A more recent survey reports an even lower share, with only 14 percent of principal operators being women (Joseph *et al.*, 2024).

Although not explicitly focused on agricultural land, Doss and Mika (2025) analyze data from 45 low- and middle-income countries and find that the gender gap in land ownership tends to be wider in countries with higher GDP per capita. Their study also reveals that rural transformation - measured by agricultural value-added per agricultural worker - is associated with a larger gender gap in land ownership. In contrast, structural transformation – captured by the share of non-agricultural value-added in GDP – is linked to a narrowing of this gap.

Rural transformation – tied to mechanization, agricultural commercialization, and rising land prices – is linked to declining employment in primary agriculture, especially for women, contributing to gender disparities in land ownership. Meanwhile, structural transformation tends to expand income-generating opportunities for women in off-farm employment, enhancing their agency and resources to acquire land, which may not necessarily be agricultural.

Figure A1. Gender gap in agricultural land ownership relative to GDP per capita



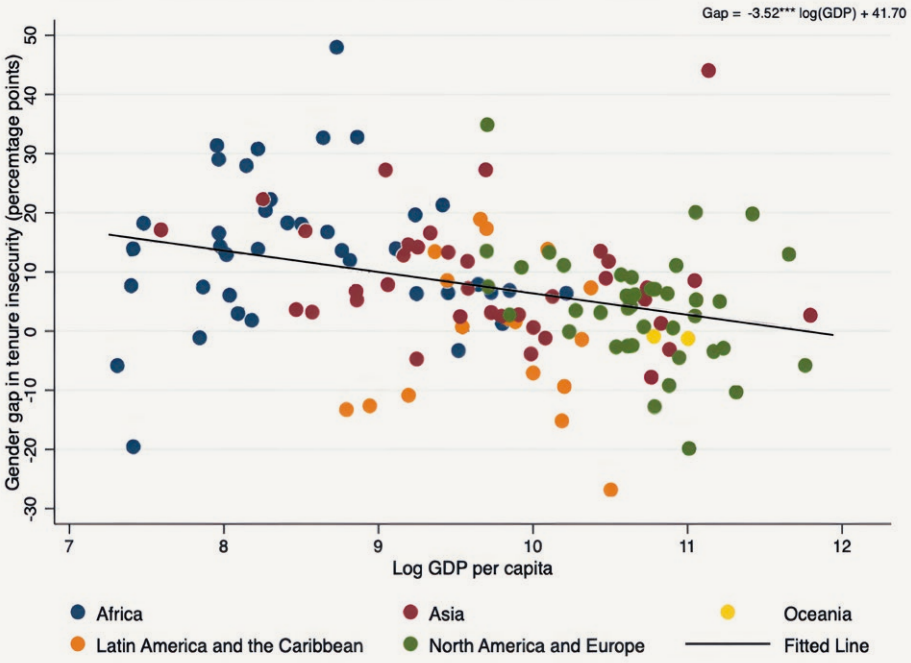
Note: The figure shows the gender gap (male-female) in agricultural land ownership or secure tenure rights among agricultural populations (SDG 5.a.1 versus log per capita GDP).

Source: Authors' own elaboration based on official reports for SDG indicator 5.a.1: (a) Proportion of total agricultural population with ownership or secure rights over agricultural land, by sex. UN Statistical Division. 2025. SDG Indicators Database.***https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/dataportal***. [Accessed on 26 May 2025] and GDP per capita, PPP (constant 2021 international USD) for 2024 and 2023 from the World Development Indicators, ***https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.PP.KD***

However, among those who own land, tenure insecurity decreases with economic development, with the gender gap in tenure insecurity narrowing in higher-income countries in the event of divorce or spousal death (Figure A2). In countries with lower levels of economic development, measured by per capita GDP, a higher share of married women than married men worry about losing their property in the event of divorce or death of their spouse.

Robust legal protections for women's land rights in many high-income countries partly explain this. However, countries with strong legal protections for women's land rights can be found across various global regions and across countries at different levels of development, as evidenced by the absence of a significant correlation between (log) GDP per capita and the SDG 5.a.2 legal score among the SDG 5.a.2 reporting countries. Other factors, including implementation mechanisms, the rule of law, and gender norms, could play a role in strengthening women's perceptions of their tenure security.

Figure A2. Gender gap in tenure insecurity in case of divorce or spousal death relative to GDP per capita



Note: The figure shows the gender gap (female - male) in tenure insecurity in the event of divorce or spousal death among married landowners of any property.***Source (figure):*** Authors' own elaboration based on Prindex. 2024. Global Data Reveals Growing Insecurity in Land and Property Rights Across 108 Countries. ***https://www.prindex.net/data/*** [Accessed on 24 March 2025] and GDP per capita, PPP (constant 2021 international USD) for 2024 and 2023 from the World Development Indicators, ***https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.PP.KD***

Source: Authors' own elaboration based on sources listed in the References section.

Despite notable progress, largely driven by the SDG agenda, significant gaps remain in the availability of sex- and age-disaggregated data. In particular, a gap in data on the full bundle of land rights and decision-making authority over land persists, as agricultural and household surveys rarely capture this information comprehensively. Moreover, women who report owning land may not possess the full spectrum of rights, which are often shared with other household or community members (Slavchevska *et al.*, 2021). World Bank Living Standards Measurement Study (LSMS) surveys show that only a small share of men and women claim full ownership and related rights. Men are more likely than women to report having full ownership rights in Ethiopia and the United Republic of Tanzania, whereas in Malawi and Cambodia, the same proportion of men and women report having full ownership rights (Hasanbasri *et al.*, 2021a; 2021b).

An important caveat is that survey questions often focus on identifying who performs specific tasks or makes decisions, rather than explicitly asking whether individuals hold the rights to do so. Thus, the data do not always focus effectively on property rights, but present a more nuanced picture of access to land and land-use rights, showcasing different processes and power relations (Ribot and Peluso, 2003; Peluso and Ribot, 2020).

The status of women's rights to land in law

While constitutional gender equality provisions are common, both official data reported to date under SDG 5.a.2 and complementary analysis by the Rights and Resources Initiative (RRI) show that many countries' legal frameworks fall short of fully recognizing and protecting women's land rights as required by CEDAW, due to gaps in laws, policies, and implementation.

Among the 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 (see Table 4.1, Box 4.3; also see Box 2.4 in chapter 2).

Even where laws are in place, they are often fragmented, inconsistently applied, or misaligned across sectors – such as inheritance, marriage, and land administration – limiting their overall impact.

Table 4.1. Legal protections for women's land rights drawn from official SDG 5.a.2 reports

Number of proxies present	Score	Level of protection in the law	No. of countries (n=91)	Share of countries
0	1	None	13	14%
1	2	Very low	9	10%
2	3	Low	23	25%
3	4	Medium	23	25%
4	5	High	17	19%
5 or 6	6	Very high	6	7%

Source: FAO unpublished data based on officially submitted SDG indicator 5.a.2 assessment. April 2025

Box 4.2

SDG 5.a.2 data description

To collect the data for SDG 5.a.2, a wide range of legal sources must be consulted – the constitution, land and housing legislation, civil codes, laws governing marriage and family, inheritance laws, and gender equality laws. These are complemented by relevant policies and ongoing reforms in sectors such as food security, rural transformation, agricultural productivity, climate resilience, and housing and urbanization. Implementation is examined through development plans, budgets, statistical data, and stakeholder input. Importantly, the methodology also considers how legal and policy measures intersect to shape tenure rights and governance outcomes for women, especially those groups living in conditions of vulnerability and who may face discrimination based on ethnicity, age, religion, marital status, or migration background.

Data collection and validation at the national level are led by a designated national institution, which convenes a Technical Working Group (TWG). This TWG, comprising experts from national statistical offices, relevant ministries (such as Agriculture, Land, Justice, Gender Equality, and Human Rights), civil society, research institutions, and private sector representatives (where relevant), is responsible for collecting, analysing, and compiling the necessary information for the SDG Indicator 5.a.2 questionnaire with FAO technical support.

Derived from a questionnaire demanding thorough legal analysis to support its binary (Yes/No) answers, the SDG 5.a.2 score assigns equal weight to each proxy. Countries are classified based on the number of positive responses resulting in a national score ranging from 1 to 6, where 1 indicates no legal protections and 6 reflects the strongest safeguards for women's land rights. For clarity and consistency, the maximum score is capped at 6 for all countries, regardless of the outcome for proxy E (see Box 2.4).

The SDG 5.a.2 reporting process can facilitate comparisons and enhance understanding of the relevant conditions, particularly in relation to legal and policy aspects of women's land tenure, which have not been well understood in many countries. Key outputs of this process are policy dialogues and actionable recommendations for legal, policy, and implementation measures, informed by CEDAW and the VGGT and aligned with national priorities.

Notes: Based on a methodological refinement to remove the allowance of statistical data to satisfy proxy D and F thresholds without legal measures, this data may not fully correspond with FAO's 2023 Status of Women in Agrifood Systems report and FAO's SDG website (see Box 4.3).

Source: Authors' own elaboration based on the methodology for SDG 5.a.2 published SDG Indicators Metadata Repository. In: SDG Indicators. [Cited 26 May 2025]. ***https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/metadata/***

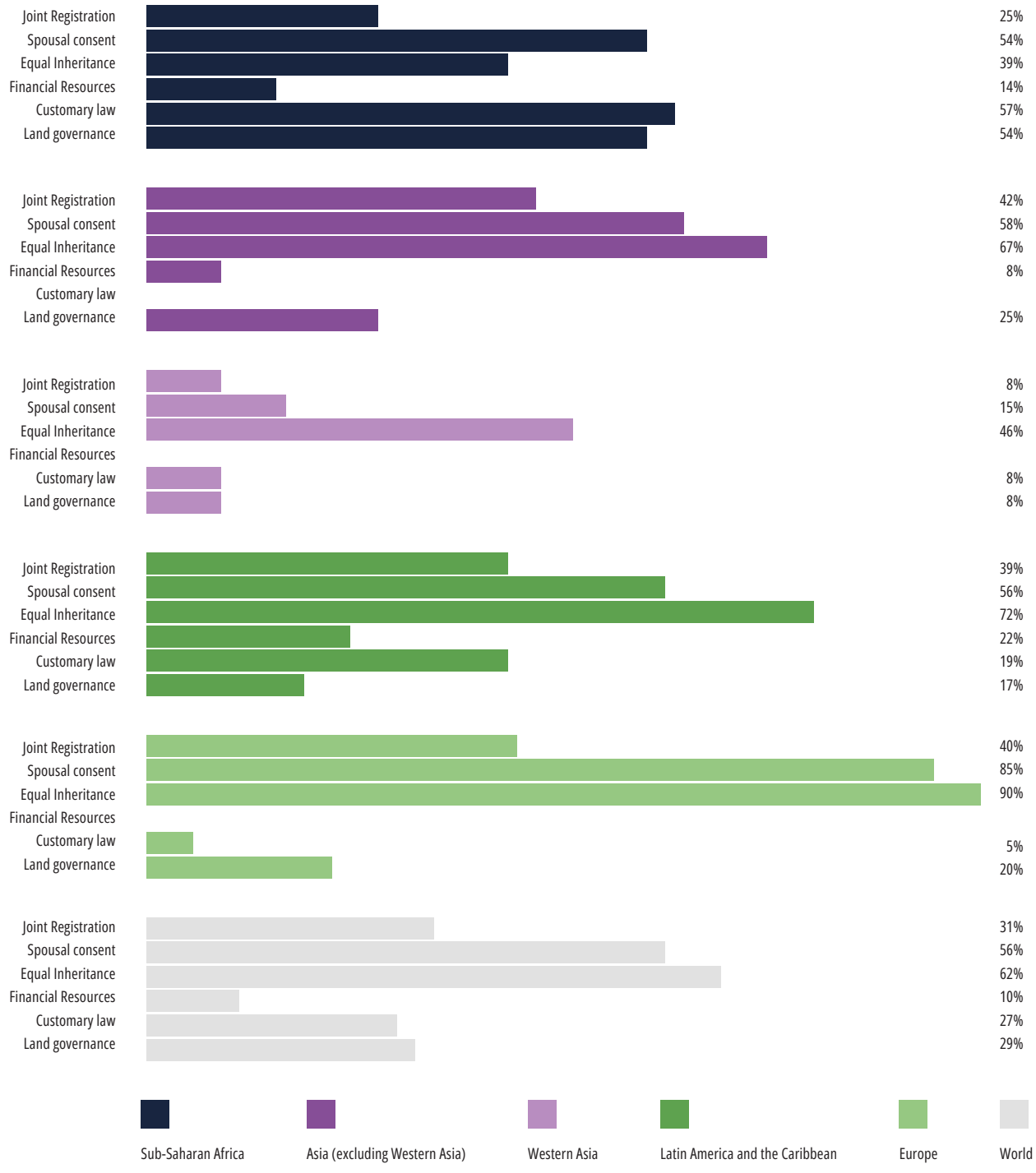
Compulsory joint registration of land

In one-third of countries reporting on SDG 5.a.2, jointly owned land must be registered in the name of both spouses (Figure 4.6). Only a small share of countries in sub-Saharan Africa (25 percent) and Western Asia (8 percent) has legal provisions for joint land registration. The methodology requires community property to be the default or presumed matrimonial property regime, with joint registration legally mandated. Such measures often accompany agrarian reforms or target specific groups: for example, Guatemala offers joint titling for landless rural families. Cambodia's and Kazakhstan's legal procedures require joint registration. Some countries have repealed these provisions – for example, the Lao People's Democratic Republic removed the dual names requirement from the 2003 Land Law in the 2019 amendment. Others, such as Armenia and Senegal, provide for optional joint registration.

Compulsory spousal consent for transactions involving jointly owned land

Fifty-six percent of the SDG 5.a.2 reporting countries require spousal permission to mortgage or sell land considered joint marital property, regardless of who acquired it, the financial contributions made, or the name under which it is registered (Figure 4.6). Spousal consent is legally mandated in most countries in Europe, as well as in most regions in Asia, sub-Saharan Africa, as well as Latin America and the Caribbean (Figure 4.6). In many countries, generic spousal consent clauses do not exist because the separation of property is the default matrimonial regime. In such cases, the law often grants each spouse individual ownership and the freedom to administer their own assets; an approach reflected in the Women, Business and the Law (WBL) index, where 92 percent of countries recognize equal administrative authority during marriage. By contrast, SDG Indicator 5.a.2 assesses whether joint ownership and spousal consent are required: standards that go beyond individual rights. Based on this stricter criterion, only 56 percent of reporting countries fully or partially meet the requirement for joint management and consent. Where spousal consent provisions do exist, they may be limited in scope – applying only to certain types of property, such as the family home or family land. In some sub-Saharan African countries, such as Chad, Guinea-Bissau, Mauritania, and Niger, no spousal consent clauses are established. Instead, the husband is typically recognized as the head of the family and the sole administrator of the family's assets, including, in some cases, the wife's assets. Such provisions are highlighted in SDG 5.a.2 assessments as undermining joint management and spousal consent. They are also flagged by the WBL index for limiting each spouse's right to independently administer assets. The limited overlap between the two datasets reflects their distinct approaches: WBL focuses on individual rights regardless of the type of marital property system, while SDG 5.a.2 highlights joint rights to shared or common assets. This reflects evidence that mandating joint management can enhance women's formal recognition in asset governance, affirm their role in household decision-making, and improve actual control over property, even when enforcement is weak (Doss *et al.*, 2014; Amir-ud-Din, Naz and Ali, 2024; Ghimire *et al.*, 2024). Ultimately, the choice between these approaches is a policy decision that should be guided by each country's legal system and social context.

Figure 4.6. Share of countries per region and globally where SDG 5.a.2 proxies are present



Source: FAO unpublished data based on officially submitted SDG indicator 5.a.2 assessment. July 2025.
These averages are based on 20 countries in Europe, 28 countries in sub-Saharan Africa, 18 countries in Latin America and the Caribbean, 12 countries in Asia (excluding Western Asia), and 13 countries in Western Asia.

Women's and girls' equal inheritance rights

Globally, 38 percent of reporting countries do not ensure equal inheritance rights for women and men, or for girls and boys, in cases without a will (Figure 4.6). This often results from religious or customary laws that deny widows and daughters equal rights. In contrast, the WBL data for the same countries show that only 17 percent of countries lack equality, as it measures statutory provisions without accounting for exclusions that affect specific groups. SDG 5.a.2 considers inheritance provisions unequal if women from customary or religious communities are excluded by law. While the risk of exclusion persists even with safeguards – particularly where gender intersects with ethnicity, religion, disability, or sexual orientation (Duncan and Brants, 2004; Tom, 2024) – the absence of legal limits on the application of customary or religious norms increases the likelihood that these norms will override gender-neutral provisions. Explicitly restricting such recognition, at a minimum, sends a strong normative signal in support of equality and helps highlight the barriers faced by groups living in conditions of vulnerability.

In most regions, apart from Latin America, a few European countries, and Ethiopia, marriage-like consensual unions are not commonly legally recognized and are sometimes prohibited. Even where recognized, partners in consensual unions often have fewer protections than spouses in inheritance or family matters. Legal recognition of consensual unions (including sometimes same-sex unions) varies widely across countries. In the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, such unions are becoming more common, but legal treatment still differs – ranging from limited recognition, often contingent on registration or other formalities, to full legal recognition. In many least developed countries (LDCs), especially in sub-Saharan Africa, overlapping legal systems (statutory, customary, and religious) complicate recognition. Although cohabitation is less common in these regions due to traditional and religious norms, it has been linked to greater women's empowerment where it does occur (Ayebeng *et al.*, 2025), highlighting the need for legal frameworks to reflect changing social realities.

Allocation of financial resources to increase women's ownership and control over land

A limited number of countries allocate long-term funding to support women's land ownership and rights through development funds, technical assistance, tax breaks, subsidies, or access to training, credit, or insurance (Figure 4.6). These measures, which are crucial for advancing women's empowerment, have been introduced recently in several countries. Nepal introduced tax exemptions for women registering land in 2020. Although Burkina Faso enacted a 2015 law establishing a 30 percent land quota for women farmers, it did not report meeting the proxy requirements, citing limited time and resources for effective implementation.

In Chad, the 2018 Agro-Sylvo-Pastoral and Halieutic Orientation Ordinance includes provisions to support women's access to rural land and agricultural credit through targeted subsidies and the establishment of a National Investment Fund. The law also promotes financing mechanisms such as low-interest banking products and microfinance institutions to facilitate women's access to production resources. However, while these measures offer positive prospects, the implementing regulations needed to operationalize these provisions were not yet available during the evaluation, delaying full enforcement.

Nepal's trajectory toward gender-equitable land ownership has been driven by sustained grassroots mobilization, constitutional recognition (2015), and targeted financial incentives such as the 2020 Financial Bills. Tax rebates and fee reductions for land registered by or jointly with women have had measurable positive outcomes, especially in parts like Sunsari and Kapilvastu (Ghimire, 2022; Ghimire *et al.*, 2024). Joint land ownership, in particular, offers significant benefits in terms of financial autonomy, empowerment, and socioeconomic advancement. Although Costa Rica's 2012 Law 9036 and its 2018 regulation introduced measures to enhance women's access to land – such as preferential credit and prioritized allocation within a broader set of eligible beneficiaries – no studies have documented concrete outcomes, and a significant gender gap remains. In response, a new law passed in July 2025 aims to address these gaps by allocating 8 percent of the agrarian tax to programs for women, ensuring that at least 50 percent of land distributed by the Instituto de Desarrollo Rural (INDER) goes to rural women, and providing technical assistance, credit access, training, and the collection of gender-disaggregated data (UNDP, 2025). If effectively implemented and monitored, this law could represent a significant step toward achieving gender equity in rural land access.

Explicit protection of the land rights of women in legal systems that recognize customary land tenure

Of the 45 countries that explicitly recognize customary law or customary land tenure, only 25 have legal provisions asserting that the principles of non-discrimination or gender equality take precedence over customary law in cases of conflict (Figure 4.6). For SDG 5.a.2, countries report on Proxy E when their legal frameworks recognize customary law or customary land tenure. However, this recognition must explicitly guarantee women's rights within the same legal instrument, particularly in areas such as land administration. Simply acknowledging customary tenure without these explicit provisions to protect women's rights does not suffice, even when the Constitution includes gender equality clauses. Notably, the absence of Proxy E reporting suggests either the absence of or no legal recognition of customary systems. Even where they are recognized, legal provisions often fall short of meeting SDG 5.a.2 standards, particularly regarding land registration, inheritance, and the supremacy of non-discrimination principles over conflicting customary norms.

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 (Figure 4.6). In Latin America, 7 out of 18 countries protect gender equality, usually through constitutional protections rather than specific land laws. In some countries, such as the Russian Federation, Mongolia, and Indonesia, the legal framework partially acknowledges customary rights, but with significant restrictions. These laws typically do not address gender issues in a manner that meets the SDG 5.a.2 requirements. Morocco offers another example where the formal legal framework acknowledges women's potential rights to collective land under customary management and subdivision processes; however, full ownership and equitable distribution are not guaranteed (Box 4.6).

Mandatory quotas for women's participation in land management and administration institutions

Mandatory quotas for women's participation in land administration and management institutions exist in 26 of 91 countries reporting on SDG 5.a.2, with 15 being in sub-Saharan Africa. These quotas often appear where marriage and inheritance laws deny women equal rights, such as in Chad, Liberia, and Pakistan. However, enforcement can be difficult as illustrated by Ethiopia's abandonment of quotas. Some countries, such as Mozambique, use quotas in consultation forums instead of decision-making bodies. Nepal's 1993 Civil Service Act mandates quotas across all civil service functions for diverse groups: women, Indigenous Peoples' groups, customary communities, castes facing discrimination, and persons with disabilities, among others. Kenya and Uganda extend land governance quotas to include youth and persons with disabilities. Nicaragua and Colombia emphasize ethnic minorities and Indigenous Peoples in their land administration frameworks. The Republic of Guinea-Bissau's 2018 land regulation demonstrates a strong commitment to gender-inclusive land governance by mandating women's representation at all levels of land commissions, with multiple seats specifically reserved for women representatives from diverse organizations, to ensure their active participation in decision-making. It also emphasizes broad community involvement across different social and age groups during land delimitation processes. Together, these examples show how countries strengthen land governance by incorporating a broad, intersectional range of groups experiencing vulnerability.

Box 4.3

Women's rights in customary tenure settings

Globally, three-quarters of rural people live within one kilometre of forests that they rely on for food, fuel, income, and culture (FAO, 2022). Therefore, analysing community-based forest tenure provides a crucial perspective on women's rights to access, manage, and use natural resources. Legal recognition of the rights of women from Indigenous Peoples, Afro-descendant, and other customary communities in community-based forest tenure regimes (CBTRs) remains inadequate across most national frameworks. Only modest progress was made between 2016 and 2024 (RRI, 2025). Women's participation in community forest governance remains the least protected of the rights assessed among 104 legal frameworks across 35 countries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Only two percent set quorum requirements for women's participation, and just 5 percent address women's leadership roles. About 20 percent consider women in community-level dispute resolution, while fewer than 30 percent explicitly recognize women's right to community membership. Legal recognition of women's governance roles is closely linked to communities' collective forest rights and their ability to exercise Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC). Stronger protections for women in decision-making tend to be found where communities hold greater collective management rights. Finally, fewer than 15 percent of national frameworks adequately recognize women's inheritance rights within communities. Countries with domestic violence legislation that includes the prohibition of economic violence are more likely to offer stronger legal protection for women's land and inheritance rights overall.

Between 2016 and 2024, governments in Africa, Asia, and Latin America made limited progress in strengthening legal protections for women's rights in community-based forest tenure systems, with only eight gender-responsive reforms recorded – four in Asia, three in Latin America, and one in Africa (RRI, 2025). Despite clear legal responsibilities, guidance, and evidence, most reforms were gender-neutral. They overlooked the specific needs of Indigenous, Afro-descendant, and local community women. Regressive legal changes were concentrated in Africa and Asia, with six instances that weakened protections either by removing gender provisions or reducing rights for all community members, disproportionately affecting women. Four additional gender-blind reforms – three in Asia and one in Africa – amended laws on voting, inheritance, and dispute resolution without addressing women's participation or access.

These regional trends reflect broader patterns: While Africa and Asia saw the greatest number of legal setbacks – through both regressive and gender-blind reforms – Latin America stood out for not enacting any rollbacks between 2016 and 2024. Although the region has the lowest overall proportion of frameworks that fully protect women's community forest rights, it has made advances in key areas. Latin America leads in recognizing the rights of intestate inheritance for Indigenous, Afro-descendant, and grassroots women, in securing community-based forest rights, and in establishing robust Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) protections. These strengths suggest that Latin American countries, while still facing significant gaps, may offer useful models for integrating women's rights into broader frameworks for community-based forest governance.

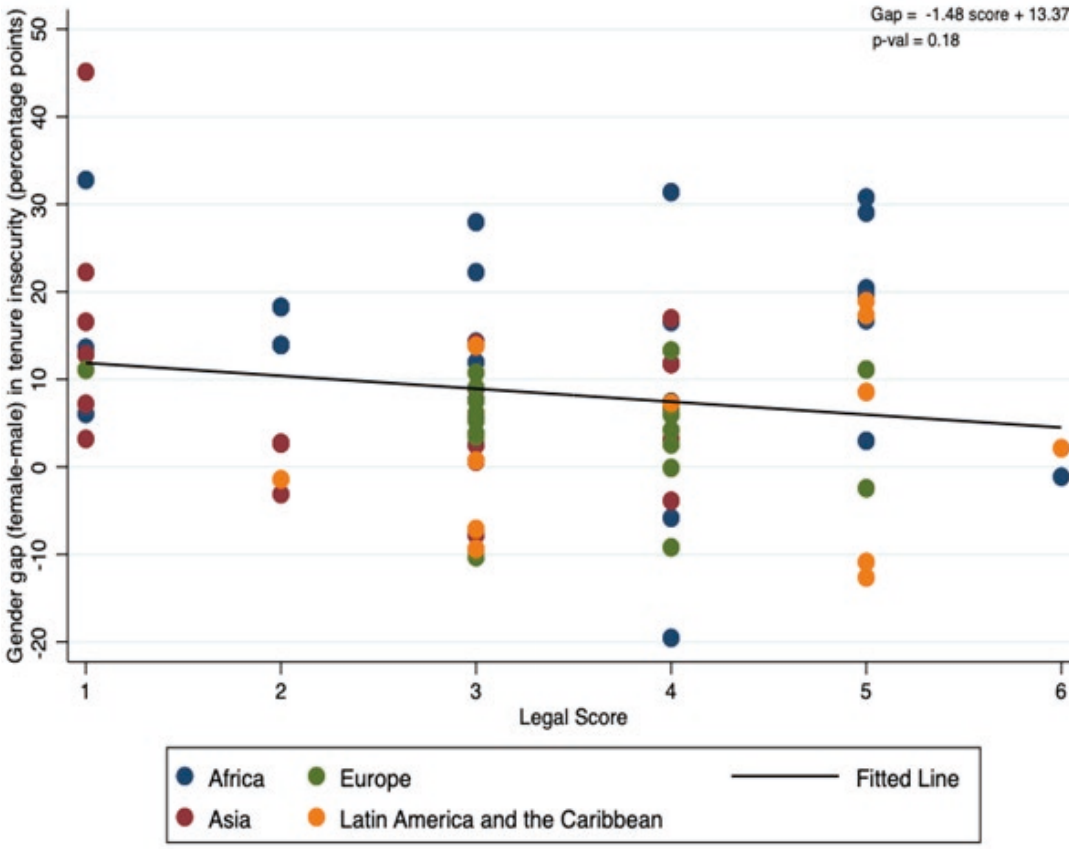
Sources: Authors' own elaboration based on RRI. 2025. Resilience & Resistance: Indigenous, Afro-descendant, and local community women's statutory rights to community forests. Rights and Resources Initiative. ***https://doi.org/10.53892/QSTZ6441*** and FAO. 2022. The State of the World's Forests 2022. Forest pathways for green recovery and building inclusive, resilient and sustainable economies. Rome, FAO. ***https://doi.org/10.4060/cb9360en***.

Strengthening women's land rights

The importance of securing women's land rights is firmly established and recognized. Overall, this has resulted in a growing global trend toward stronger legal intent for strengthening women's land rights. Nevertheless, efforts to improve land rights often encounter deeper legal and socio-cultural constraints rooted in family law, which governs critical issues such as inheritance and marital property. Because family law is closely tied to religious and cultural norms, reforms in this area tend to be highly contentious, politically sensitive, and slow to advance. In many contexts, constitutional guarantees for equality coexist with unreformed customary or family laws, limiting the reach of progressive land legislation (Tripp, 2023). Legal change remains incremental and non-linear, requiring sustained advocacy and institutional commitment – especially in countries where legal capacity is weak or resistance is entrenched (Bayisenge, 2018; Htun and Weldon, 2018; Brulé, 2020, 2023).

Figure 4.7 illustrates that stronger legal protections for women's land rights (SDG 5.a.2) are associated with a narrower gap in perceived tenure insecurity among married people, particularly in cases of divorce or spousal death (although the relationship is not statistically significant). Supporting this, Doss and Mika (2025), in their cross-country analysis of 45 low- and middle-income countries, show that while economic growth alone does not reduce gender disparities in land ownership, greater gender equality in labour, education, and legal and social norms is strongly linked to narrower gender gaps, highlighting the pivotal role of national institutions in advancing women's land rights.

Figure 4.7. Gender gap in tenure insecurity in the event of divorce or spousal death based on legal protections for women's land rights

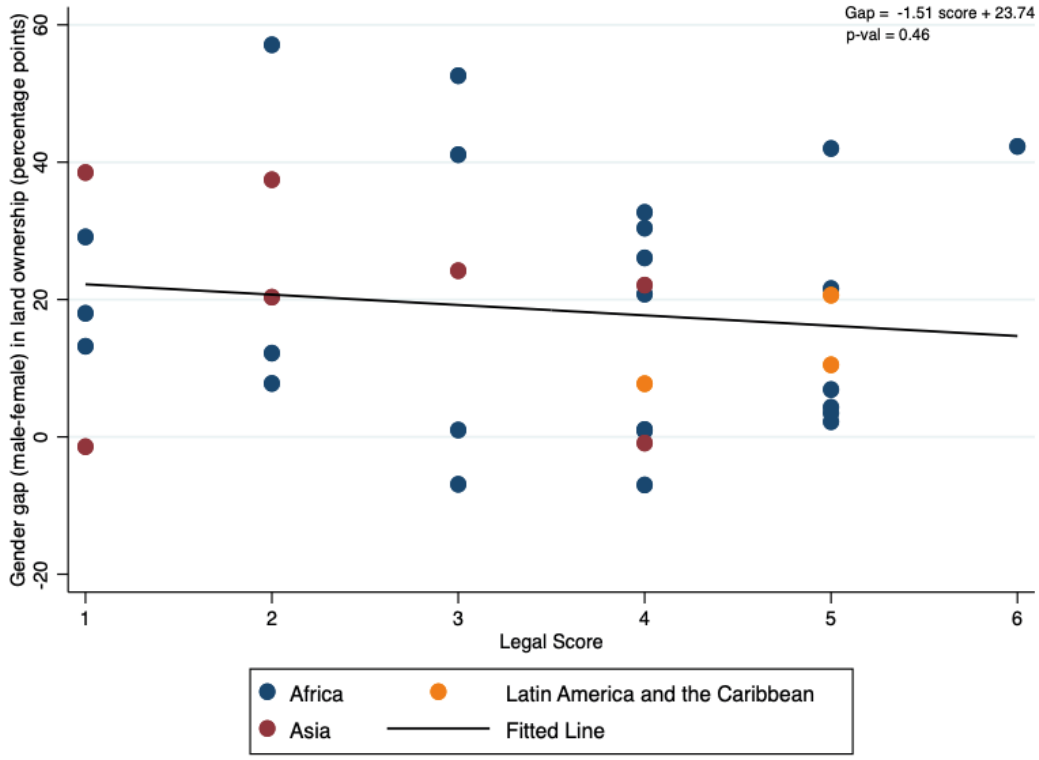


Note: The figure shows the gender gap (female–male) in tenure insecurity in the cases of divorce or spousal death among married landowners of any property. The data on land insecurity is based on Prindex data for 2024; 2020 data are used for countries where Prindex data were not collected in 2024.

Source: Authors' estimates for countries with available data for both tenure insecurity (Prindex. 2024. Global Data Reveals Growing Insecurity in Land and Property Rights Across 108 Countries. ***https://www.prindex.net/data/*** [Accessed on 24 March 2025]) and SDG 5.a.2 (FAO unpublished data based on officially submitted SDG indicator 5.a.2 assessment. July 2025)

However, weak correlations between legal protections (5.a.2) and outcomes (5.a.1) suggest that laws on the books do not always translate to change on the ground, particularly in agricultural land contexts (Figure 4.8).

Figure 4.8. Relationship between agricultural land ownership and score for legal protections for women's land rights



Note: The dataset includes 34 countries where both SDG 5.a.1 and SDG 5.a.2 are available. The y-axis is the gender gap in the incidence of agricultural land ownership (SDG 5.a.1) between men and women. The x-axis represents the SDG 5.a.2 legal score, indicating the level of protection of women's land rights in each country (1 = none; 6 = very high).

Source: Estimates reflect revisions to Slavchevska, V., Veldman, M., Park, C.M.Y., Boero, V., Gurbuzer, L.Y., and Macchioni Giaquinto, A. 2025. ***From law to practice: A cross-country assessment of gender inequalities in land rights***. Global Food Security, 45: 100852. ***https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gfs.2025***.100852 using newly available data.

Several factors may help explain these weak correlations and the gap between laws enacted and their implementation in rural contexts.

Firstly, in many countries, reforms remain incomplete. Nearly 49 percent of countries report meeting only two or fewer of the six legal proxies under SDG indicator 5.a.2, underscoring persistent legal gaps in women's land rights. While in some cases, severe gender inequality may drive countries to adopt reforms, these reforms often remain fragmented or poorly implemented. The positive examples of Nepal and Costa Rica illustrate the importance of far-reaching, intentional, evidence-based reforms. Nepal demonstrates how sustained advocacy, legal reform, and targeted financial incentives can gradually close gender gaps in land ownership. Costa Rica's case highlights how strong legal intent must be accompanied by implementation mechanisms, data systems, and monitoring to achieve meaningful impact.

Secondly, in some cases, countries may adopt legal reforms precisely because of the severity of existing gender inequalities. However, this also means that implementation in such contexts requires even greater attention.

Even in countries where robust legal safeguards exist on paper, challenges such as limited legal awareness, low literacy rates, inadequate access to justice, and weak local governance often undermine their effectiveness. Women in rural and remote areas, particularly those with low levels of education and agency, face heightened disadvantages, creating a cycle where exclusion reinforces itself and legal rights remain out of reach in practice.

Thirdly, many countries still face delays in harmonizing gender and land-related legislation across sectors, which in turn hinders progress towards global human rights commitments that require substantive equality for women and girls. For instance, gender-responsive land administration or equal inheritance rights may be inconsistently applied, marriage laws often remain misaligned, and certain groups of women – such as those in customary marriages or consensual unions – may be overlooked. Some countries rely on temporary special measures rather than fully recognizing women's land ownership rights, or they adopt progressive policies but fail to enact effective, binding legislation. Strengthening the rule of law and institutional capacity is especially critical in countries with weak governance, as it ensures that legal protections translate into real change (World Justice Project, 2024).

Fourthly, a significant reason for countries not adopting reforms to improve women's land tenure stems from the fact that many aspects relate to family law matters, which often implicate deep cultural and religious considerations and beliefs (Htun and Weldon, 2018). Of the six proxies pertaining to indicator 5.a.2, three are largely determined by family law. While different religious, cultural, and historical experiences may result in differing dynamics for relevant legal and policy reforms, in many cases, changing family law can be highly contentious. In some contexts, reforms of laws on inheritance, for instance, can be understood as questioning fundamental societal commitments to religion or tradition. While women's rights have made significant progress in terms of constitutional protections for equality and non-discrimination, family and customary law have undergone relatively less reform (Tripp, 2023).

Fifthly, experience with legal reform in many other contexts suggests that the process can often be lengthy and affected by unexpected contingencies. While data are critical to developing and implementing evidence-based reform, taking a short-term perspective may obscure potentially negative consequences of policy and legal reform (Fogelman, 2016). The need for a long-term perspective on legal change involving the family law aspects of women's land rights is supported by the relatively recent history of women's rights enactments. For instance, CEDAW entered into force in 1981. States have adopted reforms in recent decades; however, the speed of change has varied and often been incremental. The notion of women's land rights is broad and encompasses multiple areas of law. These areas often differ in their amenability to and dynamics of change processes. An additional factor is the pushback against family and land law reforms (Bayisenge, 2017; Brulé, 2020). Despite evidence of backlash in some situations, there is a significant trend for the advancement of women's rights in both developed and developing countries (Forester *et al.*, 2022; Brulé, 2023).

A deeper understanding of gender differences in land ownership and tenure security is crucial for developing targeted and effective policies. Achieving this will require overcoming the key data challenges discussed in this chapter, such as identifying additional and complementary data sources, harmonizing existing datasets, and improving collection and dissemination methods. It is equally important to examine how different data sources can be integrated and used together to capture the range of issues surrounding women's land rights – both in law and in practice – across and within diverse countries and contexts.

Bringing together data on diverse aspects of gender and land tenure shows this complexity. Legal indicators, such as SDG Indicator 5.a.2, the Rights and Resources Initiative (RRI), and the World Bank's Women, Business, and the Law (WBL) dataset, offer insights into the strength and scope of legal protections. Complementing these, SDG Indicator 5.a.1 captures the distribution of ownership and secure tenure rights over agricultural land among the adult population, disaggregated by sex, revealing gender disparities in land ownership. Similarly, SDG Indicator 1.4.2 focuses more broadly on the proportion of the population with legally recognized documentation and perceived security of tenure across all land use types. In addition, Prindex data contribute further by measuring perceptions of tenure insecurity across a range of tenure arrangements and population groups. Together, these data sources provide a more comprehensive and layered understanding of how gendered land rights function in practice and how policies can be informed, with each indicator offering unique insights (Box 4.4). Additionally, multi-stakeholder processes of collecting data and the data that they generate help national stakeholders identify structural gender inequalities and discrimination in legal and policy frameworks. For example, in Mozambique, the parallel progression of land reform and SDG reporting has helped identify legal and policy gaps, directly shaping the 2025 draft Land Law. The new draft includes targeted measures such as a fund for groups experiencing vulnerability, training programmes, and support for women-led land initiatives, aligning broader equity goals.

> ***To make reforms sustainable and legitimate, legal processes and policy dialogues must engage women's movements and grassroots groups, whose advocacy drives change, in data processes.***

The process of data collection, dissemination, and analysis on women's land rights is contributing to the development of new communities of experts and civil society around these issues. Such groups can lead to a new understanding of relevant issues and help frame ideas in ways that can stimulate reform (Slaughter, 2004; Cohen, Forbis and Misri, 2018; Forester *et al.*, 2022; Reiners, 2023).

Box 4.4

Citizen-generated data for documenting women's land rights

By harnessing citizen-generated data, a more inclusive and equitable data ecosystem can be created to support women's land rights and contribute to achieving the SDGs (ILC, 2023).

Beyond government-led SDG reporting, other initiatives empower women and strengthen their rights to land through citizen-generated data (CGD). In Kenya, grassroots mapping initiatives – such as GROOTS Kenya (GROOTSmart, 2025) and the Shibuye Community Farmers (LLAHub, 2025) – train women to map customary land boundaries, document tenure threats, and embed their voices into policy advocacy. This low-tech, participatory mapping strengthens women's claims to land and helps secure recognition and resources. The International Land Coalition's (ILC) Global Land Governance Index (LANDex) was designed to democratize land monitoring, supplement official statistics, and empower communities experiencing marginalization – including women from Indigenous, Afro-descendant, and rural communities – by enabling them to contribute directly to land governance data and participate in policy discussions (ILC, 2019). The platform includes indicators specifically on women's land rights, tenure security, and participation, and enables the submission of citizen-generated information on these dimensions.

Using the FAO's Legal Assessment Tool (LAT), which largely mirrors SDG 5.a.2 but includes additional questions, the ILC has engaged its members in citizen-led assessments of legal frameworks on women's land rights. Across the 31 countries reviewed by ILC, land laws fell short in roughly half (47 percent) of the LANDex criteria for gender-equitable rights (ILC, 2023). Despite the limited country overlap with SDG 5.a.2 (19 countries), and the potential influence of other factors, comparison of the LANDex results with SDG 5.a.2 suggests that countries with higher LANDex scores also tend to score higher on SDG 5.a.2 (for example, Bolivia [Plurinational State of], Colombia, and Kenya). However, seven out of 19 countries with moderate or high LANDex 4A scores record low SDG 5.a.2 scores (Belize, Chile, Ecuador, Jordan, Senegal, Saint Lucia, and Saint Vincent and the Grenadines), highlighting the complexity of conducting legal analysis and the potential weakening of advocacy efforts.

These discrepancies may arise because LANDex and SDG 5.a.2 emphasize different aspects in their questions, rely on distinct data-validation methods, or reflect the inherent difficulty of assessing legal frameworks and interpreting legal provisions — particularly for non-experts. The challenge is compounded when responses lack clear justification, making it harder to understand and reconcile differing results. It is also possible that the legal safeguards prioritized by SDG 5.a.2 and organizations such as the ILC are not always perceived as the most pressing or relevant issues by individuals in diverse contexts.

Sources: Authors' own elaboration based on sources listed in the References section.

Once regarded as archaic, customary land systems are increasingly seen as vital and delivering significant added value over other systems.

Chapter 5

CUSTOMARY LANDS IN A CHANGING CLIMATE

Globally, Indigenous Peoples, and other customary communities, are considered among the most effective stewards of forests, grasslands, and wetlands, managing landscapes rich in carbon, biodiversity, and cultural heritage. Their lands and territories, often governed through customary systems, are crucial for mitigating climate change, adapting to its impacts, and protecting biodiversity (IPBES, 2019; IPCC, 2019; FAO, 2021; FAO and FILAC, 2021; WWF *et al.*, 2021).

Despite this, the land rights of customary communities often remain unrecognized in formal legal frameworks (Dooley *et al.*, 2022; Sauls, Galeana and Lawry, 2022). Even when they have legal recognition of community-based tenure (see Alden Wily, 2018, as cited in Chapter 1), frameworks may not provide a full bundle of ownership rights, or implementation has lagged behind opportunities for recognition (RRI, 2023). Such shortcomings undermine their stewardship role and weaken global efforts to address climate change and biodiversity loss. Moreover, customary lands are increasingly targeted by land-based climate solutions, such as carbon offsetting, reforestation, conservation, and renewable energy. When customary rights are not secured nor respected, this further marginalizes communities, especially women and youth, and erodes traditional institutions and knowledge systems.

This chapter synthesizes evidence and presents new geospatial analyses to highlight the extent, conditions, and vital contributions of customarily managed lands. It also examines current challenges, policy trade-offs, and opportunities to strengthen tenure security and customary land tenure and governance systems. Ultimately, it argues that legal recognition is essential but insufficient. Communities must also be empowered to exercise their rights in practice to ensure justice, equity, and resilience in climate action.

Understanding customary lands

The significance of land and customs

Land carries diverse cultural values and meanings (UNCCD, 2017), grounded in lived experience and distinct ways of knowing (Global Land Programme, 2022). It is central to human identity, heritage, and belonging (Ciparisse, 2003; Sánchez-Ayala, 2020). More than a matter of ownership, land reflects political, legal, and cultural relationships of jurisdiction and responsibility. In many traditions, it is viewed as a living entity that interacts with other life forms and requires reciprocal care (Kimmerer, 2013).

For many customary communities, land carries profound spiritual and cultural significance (GLP, 2022). These relationships shape their belief systems, social identity, political ties, and knowledge systems while underpinning livelihoods and well-being. Access and autonomy over land and resources are crucial for activities such as hunting, fishing, and farming, directly affecting food, energy, and water security, as well as income and employment (Ford *et al.*, 2020).

As such, unlike Western views that focus on commodification, customary communities emphasize relational and ecological connections to their territory (Escobar, 2018).

Closeness and intimacy with a particular place, often rooted in traditional knowledge systems, also shape how land and resources are governed. Many Indigenous Peoples, Afro-descendant Peoples, pastoralist communities, and tribal or mobile groups worldwide have long developed customary systems of norms, rules, institutions, and practices to manage lands, forests, grasslands, and fisheries as common property resources for the benefit of all (FAO, 2016; Alden Wily, 2018; FAO, 2002; ILC, 2022; Sauls, Galeana and Lawry, 2022). This was highlighted at the 17th annual United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues: "Protect Indigenous people's land rights and the whole world will benefit" (UN DESA, 2018).

Customary land tenure and governance

Customary land tenure systems are diverse, flexible and locally adapted, often managed by traditional authorities and involving collective, individual or mixed rights (Alden Wily, 2017; Chimhowu, 2019). As discussed in Chapter 3, many operate under hybrid systems that combine legal and statutory elements within legal pluralism (Davies, 2012; Freudenberger, 2013; Chimhowu, 2019; ILC, 2022; Sauls, Galeana and Lawry, 2022).

These systems evolve in response to socio-ecological changes, including demographic growth, urbanization, market forces and state policies (Knight, 2010; Freudenberger, 2013; Mwangi, 2016; Sauls, Galeana and Lawry, 2022; Caviedes *et al.*, 2023; Rincón Barajas, Kubitza and Lay, 2024). As a result, they are complex and often involve overlapping claims (FAO, 2002; Fitzpatrick, 2005; Cotula, 2007; Sauls, Galeana and Lawry, 2022).Even though customary lands are now recognized in many contexts, including in several African countries (Lawry *et al.*, 2023), shifts in land governance and growing pressures have led to increased commodification and exclusionary practices (Mwesigye, Matsumoto and Otsuka, 2017; Asaaga and Hirons, 2019; Awialie Akaateba, 2019).

Socio-spatial characteristics of the mapped customarily managed land

Location and extent

Mapped lands held by customary communities are currently estimated to cover approximately 4.2 billion hectares worldwide (Table 5.1). This includes 1.7 billion hectares presented on the LandMark platform (assessed July 2024) and an estimated 2.5 billion hectares identified by Garnett *et al.* (2018) across 93 countries. Together, these mapped areas represent 77 percent of all known customary lands (5.5 billion hectares – see Chapter 3) and over 32 percent of the Earth's terrestrial surface, excluding Antarctica, which is 13 billion ha (Table 5.1, Figure 5.1).

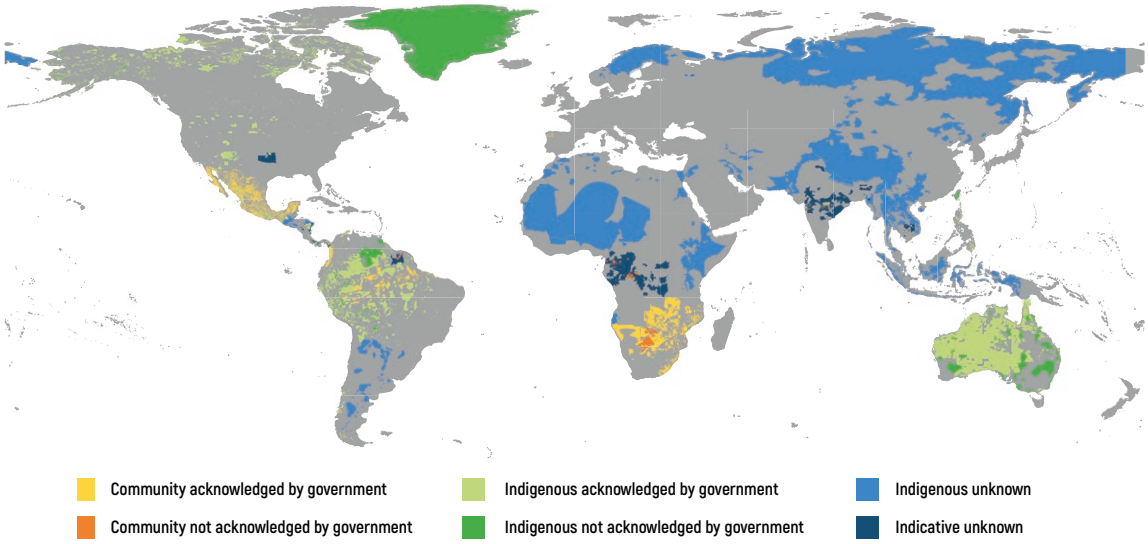
Table 5.1. Data sources for mapped customary lands

Source	Identity	Tenure status	Area (ha)
Garnett *et al.*, 2018	Indigenous	Unknown	2 510 069 533
LandMark, 2024	Community	Acknowledged	310 912 026
	Community	Unrecognized	27 461 037
	Indigenous	Acknowledged	788 822 101
	Indigenous	Unrecognized	352 703 062
	Community/Indigenous	Unknown	238 762 914
Total			**4 228 730 673**

Note: The analysis and results are based on LandMark's geospatial data [Accessed on 2 October 2024].

Source: Authors' own elaboration based on LandMark (LandMark. 2024. LandMark: The Global Platform of Indigenous and Community Lands. [Cited 26 September 2025]. ***http://www.landmarkmap.org***) and Garnett *et al.* (Garnett, S.T., Burgess, N.D., Fa, J.E. *et al.* 2018. A spatial overview of the global importance of Indigenous lands for conservation. Nature Sustainability 1: 369–374. ***https://doi.org/10.1038/s41893-018-0100-6***).

Figure 5.1. Global map of customary lands by land tenure category



Refer to the disclaimer on page ii for the names and boundaries used in this map.

Note: In this typology, 'acknowledged' tenure status refers to lands that governments have legally recognized as either owned or managed with designated use rights. 'Unrecognized' tenure status refers to lands held by communities under customary tenure arrangements but not legally recognized. 'Unknown' tenure status refers to lands where precise information on the tenure status is lacking. This applies to indicative maps for which precise locational information is not available (see Box 5.1).

Source: Authors' own elaboration based on LandMark (LandMark. 2024. LandMark: The Global Platform of Indigenous and Community Lands. [Cited 26 September 2025]. ***http://www.landmarkmap.org***) and Garnett *et al.* (Garnett, S.T., Burgess, N.D., Fa, J.E. *et al.* 2018. A spatial overview of the global importance of Indigenous lands for conservation. Nature Sustainability 1: 369–374. ***https://doi.org/10.1038/s41893-018-0100-6***).

The totals refer to currently mapped territories. These remain partial in both quantitative and qualitative terms. Over 60 percent of the maps are indicative, with their legal status yet to be defined. The analyses in this chapter, being geospatial in nature, are based on the mapped lands (both geospatially referenced and indicative).

Box 5.1

Customary lands – statistical and geospatial data (and the differences this implies between Chapters 3 and 5)

Chapter 3 gathers quantitative data on Indigenous Peoples', and other customary, territories. It categorizes them into legally recognized (owned or designated) and unrecognized categories using nationally reported data (agricultural censuses, forest inventories and land reports), as well as research by academic institutions and data initiatives working in the land tenure and governance sector, such as RRI, LandMark and GLO.

Chapter 5 uses geospatial data from two sources: (a) LandMark maps (2024); and (b) Garnett *et al.* (2018) (see Appendix 3 for details).

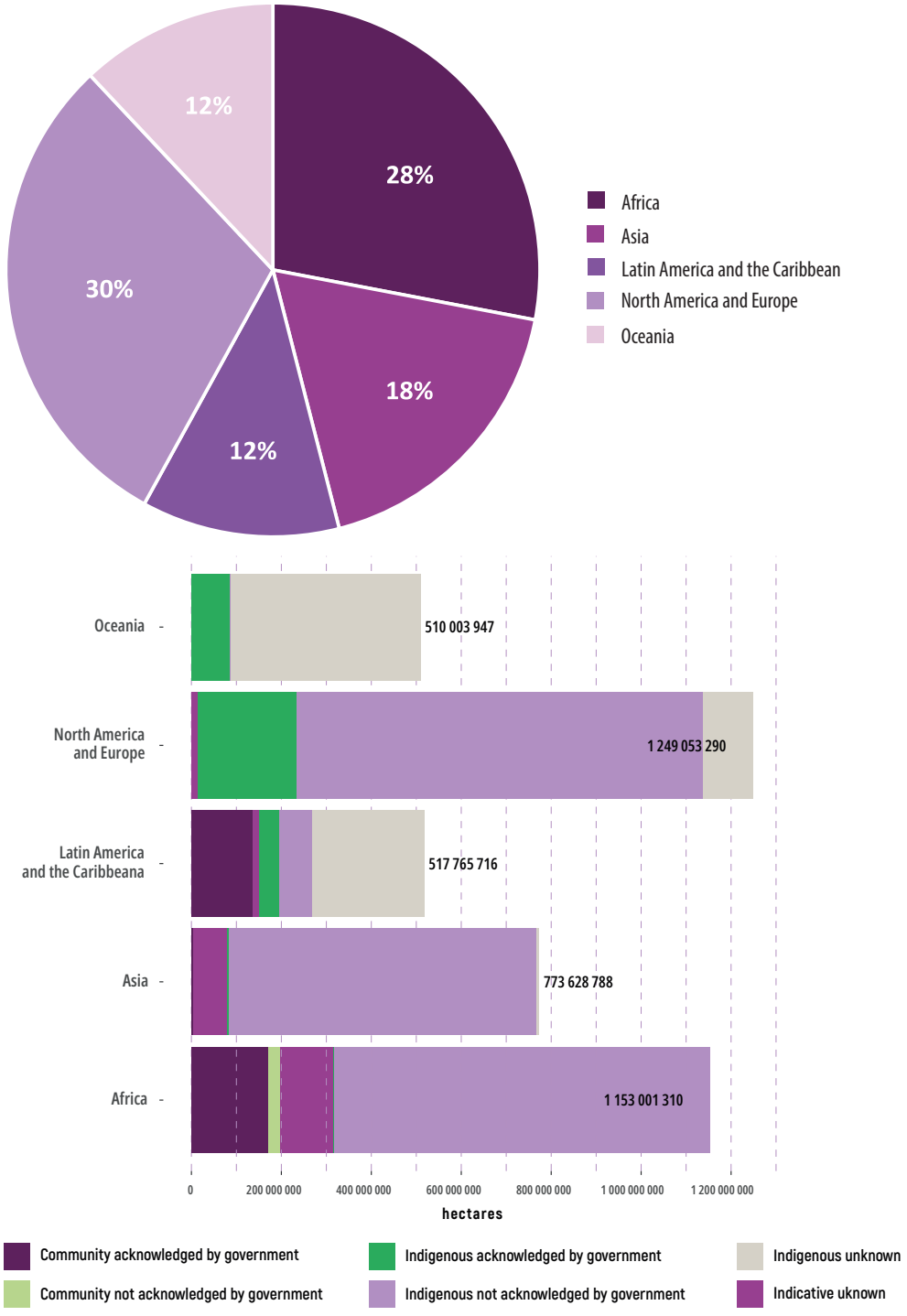
- LandMark is a global platform of Indigenous Peoples, and community, lands that displays georeferenced information on collectively held and used lands worldwide. It consolidates numerous local, national and regional efforts to map and document Indigenous Peoples, and community, lands within a single global platform. The dataset includes land boundaries for Indigenous Peoples' lands and community lands in 79 countries, categorized by legal recognition (acknowledged or not acknowledged). LandMark also includes indicative areas of Indigenous Peoples', and community, land rights (areas where Indigenous Peoples', or community, lands are likely located, but where detailed information on geospatial delimitation, recognition and documentation status is not currently available).
- Garnett *et al.* (2018) aggregates multiple publicly available sources. The map is largely composed of indicative layers based on ethnolinguistic boundaries and broader interpretations and estimations of Indigenous Peoples' lands only (no other customary lands are included). The exact delimitation and legal status of the included territories are unknown or not reported.

Together, these geospatial datasets constitute 59 percent of the reported customary lands (Chapter 3). Of the 4.2 billion ha of mapped customary lands, 64 percent do not specify tenure and governance status (classified as 'unknown' in Table 5.1). This contrasts with the classification for customary lands in Chapter 3, which relies on quantitative data sources (Appendix 3) and is disaggregated according to documented, assigned and unrecognized tenure statuses.

Source: Authors' own elaboration based on tenure typology specifics discussed in Table 3.1, Appendix 3, LandMark (LandMark. 2024. LandMark: The Global Platform of Indigenous and Community Lands. [Cited 26 September 2025]. ***http://www.landmarkmap.org***) and Garnett *et al.* (Garnett, S.T., Burgess, N.D., Fa, J.E. *et al.* 2018. A spatial overview of the global importance of Indigenous lands for conservation. Nature Sustainability 1: 369–374. ***https://doi.org/10.1038/s41893-018-0100-6***).

Of the estimated 4.2 billion hectares of mapped customary lands worldwide, 30 percent are in North America and Europe, with large tracts in the Russian Federation. Another 28 percent are in Africa, 18 percent in Asia, and 12 percent in both Latin America and the Caribbean and Oceania (Figure 5.2).

Figure 5.2. Distribution of total mapped Indigenous Peoples', and other customary communities´, lands across regions



Sources: Authors' own elaboration based on LandMark (LandMark. 2024. LandMark: The Global Platform of Indigenous and Community Lands. Available at: ***http://www.landmarkmap.org***); and Garnett *et al.* (Garnett, S.T., Burgess, N.D., Fa, J.E. *et al.* 2018. A spatial overview of the global importance of Indigenous lands for conservation. Nat Sustain 1, 369–374. ***https://doi.org/10.1038/s41893-018-0100-6***).

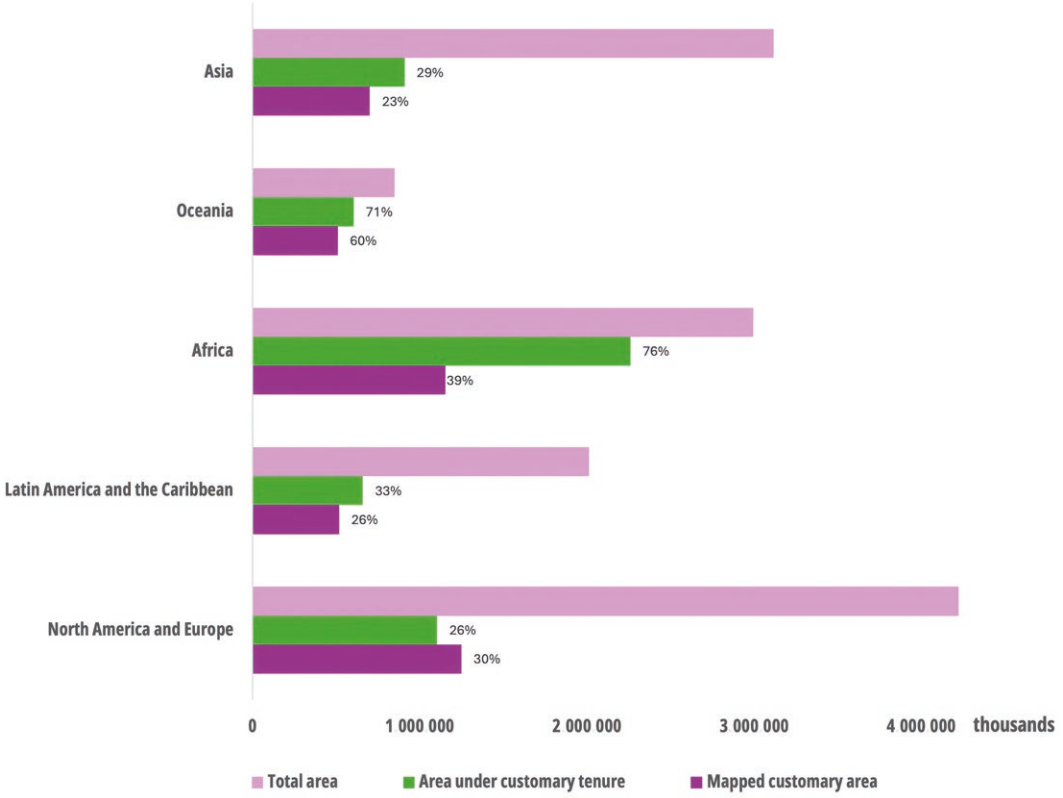
As a share of total landmass, customary lands vary significantly across regions, from 76 percent in Africa to 26 percent in North America and Europe. Although these mapped data remain partial, they correspond to the distributions detailed quantitatively in Chapter 3, except for Africa where relatively less mapped data is available.

There are sizable variations in the availability of precise georeferenced and indicative mapping, with sources from Asia, Africa, North America, and Europe largely composed of indicative maps, while more precise georeferenced data is available for Latin America, the Caribbean, and Oceania (Figure 5.3).

Even with indicative maps, the largest gaps in mapping are noted in Africa, with only about half of the land mapped.

Smaller mapping gaps occur in the other regions, from four percent in Asia to 11 percent in Oceania. Tenure status information of mapped lands also varies significantly. More detailed information is available on the legal status of most mapped customary lands in Oceania, as well as Latin America and the Caribbean, reflecting the more advanced geo-spatial data collection and the foundational work of documenting customary rights in these territories.

Figure 5.3. Regional estimates of reported and mapped customary lands



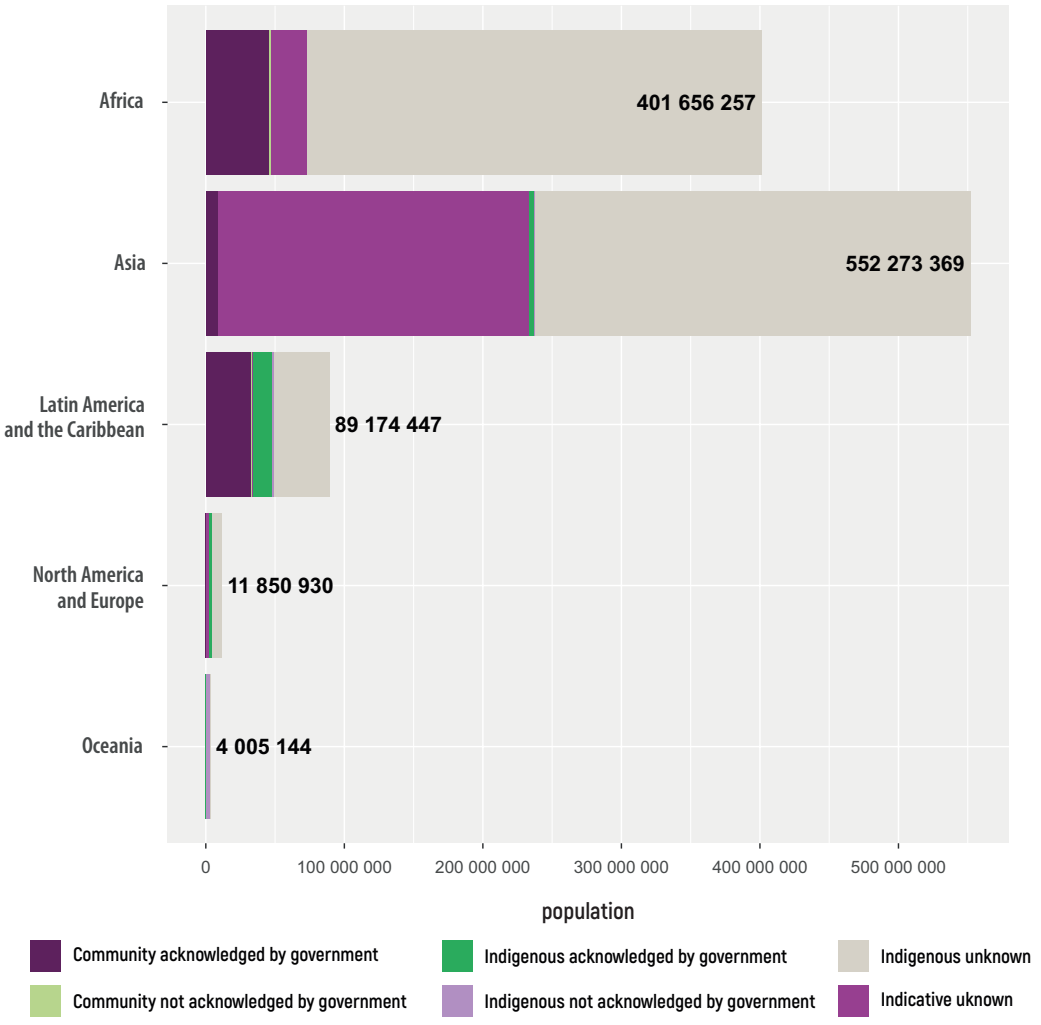
Note: The mapped area exceeds the reported area under customary tenure in North America and Europe, since the former utilizes indicative mapping sources, which are given their imprecise nature.

Sources: Authors' own elaboration based on LandMark (LandMark. 2024. LandMark: The Global Platform of Indigenous and Community Lands. Available at: ***http://www.landmarkmap.org***); and Garnett *et al.* (Garnett, S.T., Burgess, N.D., Fa, J.E. *et al.* 2018. A spatial overview of the global importance of Indigenous lands for conservation. Nat Sustain 1, 369–374. ***https://doi.org/10.1038/s41893-018-0100-6***).

Population

Estimates for the number of people who depend on customary lands for their livelihoods range from 1.5 to 2 billion (RRI, 2018; ILC, 2022). Indigenous Peoples account for about 5 percent (approximately 500 million) of the global population (UN, 2025). The majority of these populations are located in Asian countries, including India, China and Indonesia. Customary populations are mainly rural, where traditional systems of land ownership and use are most prevalent. However, although strong ties with rural territories remain prevalent (Cattaneo *et al.*, 2021), customary land tenure systems also exist in peri-urban and, increasingly, urban areas (Alden Wily, 2011). Based on population-density analysis, over 1 billion people reside within mapped customary lands (Newton *et al.*, 2016; Robinson, 2016; Sunderland and O'Connor, 2020), primarily distributed in Africa and Asia (Figure 5.4).

Figure 5.4. Population distribution within Indigenous and other customary lands by region



Sources: Authors' own elaboration based on LandMark (LandMark. 2024. LandMark: The Global Platform of Indigenous and Community Lands. Available at: ***http://www.landmarkmap.org***); Garnett *et al.* (Garnett, S.T., Burgess, N.D., Fa, J.E. *et al.* A spatial overview of the global importance of Indigenous lands for conservation. Nat Sustain 1, 369–374 (2018). ***https://doi.org/10.1038/s41893-018-0100-6***); and WorldPop (WorldPop (***www.worldpop.org*** - School of Geography and Environmental Science, University of Southampton; Department of Geography and Geosciences, University of Louisville; Département de Géographie, Université de Namur) and Center for International Earth Science Information Network (CIESIN), Columbia University (2018). Global High Resolution Population Denominators Project - Funded by The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (OPP1134076). ***https://dx.doi.org/10.5258/SOTON/WP00647***).

Biomes

Mapped customary communities' lands are largely covered by forests (37 percent), grasslands/savannahs (28 percent), deserts (20 percent), glacial/tundra (14 percent), as well as important coastal ecosystems (see Table 5.2).

Table 5.2. Distribution of customarily managed lands by biome/ecosystem

Biome	Customary area (ha)	Share of total customary land
Coastal biome*	12 536 741	0.3%
Inland coastal water bodies	2 154 914	0.1%
Deserts / Xeric Shrublands	839 080 450	20.3%
Glacial / Tundra	584 309 825	14.1%
Grasslands / Shrublands / Savana	1 174 161 491	28.6%
Mangroves	4 102 417	0.1%
Mediterranean Forests / Woodlands / Scrub	48 400 871	1.2%
Temperate Boreal Forests	689 077 919	16.4%
Tropical Forests	788 476 790	19%
Peatlands**	388 486 919	

(*) IUCN ecosystems (Keith *et al.* 2022).
(**) This layer has been counted as a separate category. Its area spans different biomes.

Sources: Authors' own elaboration based on LandMark (LandMark. 2024. LandMark: The Global Platform of Indigenous and Community Lands. Available at: ***http://www.landmarkmap.org***); Garnett *et al.* (Garnett, S.T., Burgess, N.D., Fa, J.E. *et al.* A spatial overview of the global importance of Indigenous lands for conservation. Nat Sustain 1, 369–374 (2018). ***https://doi.org/10.1038/s41893-018-0100-6***); Olson *et al.* (Olson, D. M., Dinerstein, E., Wikramanayake, E. D., Burgess, N. D., Powell, G. V. N., Underwood, E. C., D'Amico, J. A., Itoua, I., Strand, H. E., Morrison, J. C., Loucks, C. J., Allnutt, T. F., Ricketts, T. H., Kura, Y., Lamoreux, J. F., Wettengel, W. W., Hedao, P., Kassem, K. R. 2001. Terrestrial ecoregions of the world: a new map of life on Earth. Bioscience 51(11):933-938 ***https://doi.org/10.1641/0006-3568(2001)051[0933:TEOTWA]2.0.CO;2***); Keith *et al.* (Keith, D. A., J. R. Ferrer-Paris, E. Nicholson, M. Bishop, B. A., Polidoro, E. Ramirez-Llodra, M. G. Tozer, J. L. Nel, R. Mac Nally, E. J. Gregr, K. E. Watermeyer, F. Essl, D. Faber-Langendoen, J. Franklin, C. E. R. Lehmann, A. Etter, D. J. Roux, J. S. Stark, J. A. Rowland, N. A. Brummitt, U. C. Fernandez-Arcaya, I. M. Suthers, S. K. Wiser, I. Donohue, L. J. Jackson, R. T. Pennington, N. Pettorelli, A. Andrade, A. Lindgaard, T. Tahvanainen, A. Terauds, M. A. Chadwick, N. J. Murray, J. Moat, P. Pliscoff, I. Zager, and R. T. Kingsford (2022) A function-based typology for Earth's ecosystems. Nature 610, 513–518. ***https://doi.org/10.1038/s41586-022-05318-4***); and Greifswald Mire Centre (Greifswald Mire Centre (2022) Global Peatland Map 2.0. Underlying dataset of the UNEP Global Peatland Assessment - The State of the World's Peatlands: Evidence for action toward the conservation, restoration, and sustainable management of peatlands, Global Peatlands Initiative, United Nations Environment Programme, Nairobi ***https://globalpeatlands.org/***).

An estimated 44 percent of people living on these mapped customary lands are located in tropical forest ecosystems, and 39 percent in grassland, shrubland, or savannah regions.

This distribution highlights the critical role these biomes play not only in supporting the livelihoods and cultural identity of customary communities, but also in maintaining ecological balance, conserving biodiversity, and regulating the global climate. Tropical forests, for example, act as major carbon sinks and are home to some of the planet's richest biodiversity, while grasslands and savannahs provide vital ecosystem services such as water regulation, soil fertility, and carbon storage. The fact that such a large proportion of the population on these lands lives within these biomes underscores their significance as shared human-nature systems and the importance of securing land rights to ensure their sustainable stewardship.

Peatlands, one of the world's most important forms of carbon sinks, are found extensively within the territories of customary communities. These lands are estimated to encompass around 390 million hectares, accounting for approximately 80 percent of the global total of 487.8 million hectares (Greifswald Mire Centre, 2022). The majority of these peatlands are located within Indigenous Peoples' territories in Canada and across the territories of communities in the Russian Federation, highlighting the crucial role these populations play in the conservation of globally significant ecosystems.

Customary tenure rights recognition

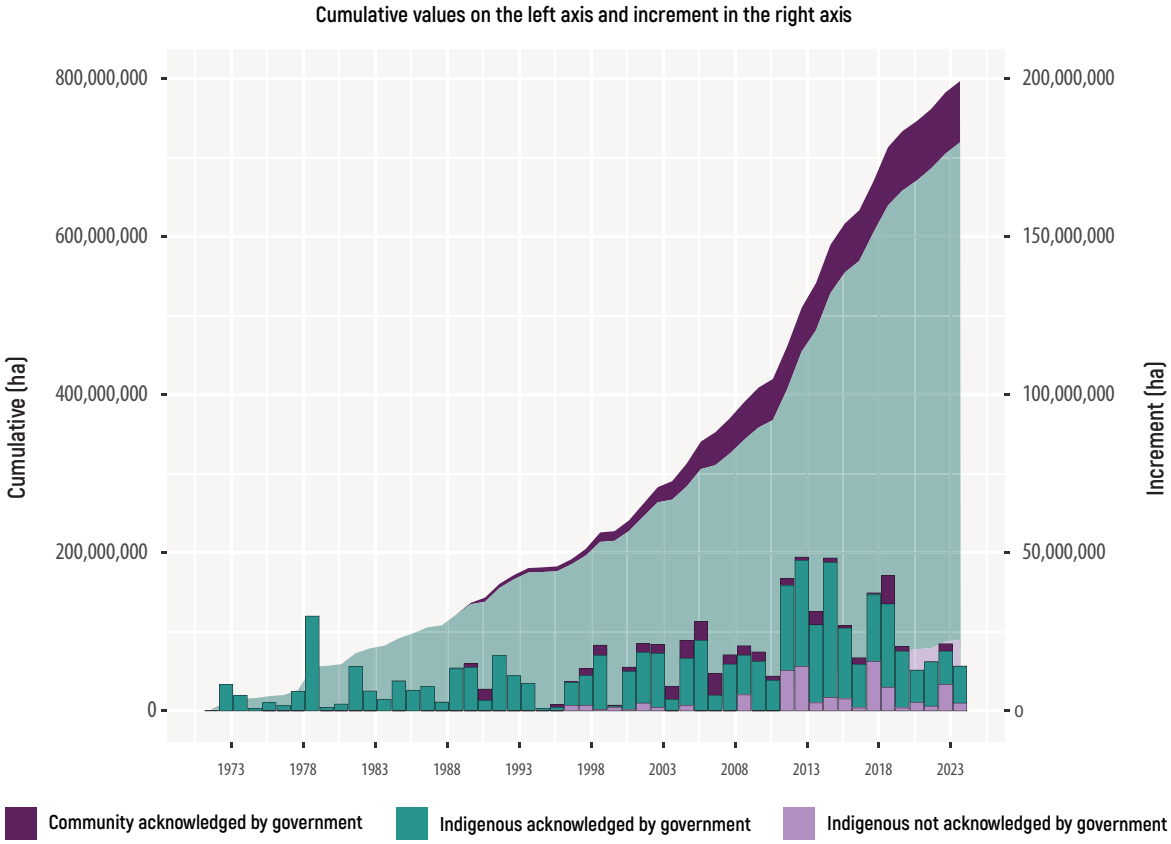
Global trends

As detailed in Chapters 1 and 3, customary land rights are increasingly being recognized under statutory law (Alden Wily, 2018; Sauls, Galeana and Lawry, 2022), despite historic efforts to privatize customary lands based on state and European tenure models (Cotula, 2007). This shift responds to global environmental concerns and the long-standing struggles of Indigenous Peoples, and other customary communities, to affirm their rights to their lands and resources (Kröger and Lalander, 2016; Sauls, Galeana and Lawry, 2022). This trend is supported by international human rights instruments (for example, ILO 169, 1989; UNDRIP, 2007; VGGT, 2012; UNDROP, 2018), which recognize it as fundamental to self-determination (Larson and Springer, 2016): it is also reflected in the SDGs and the Convention on Biological Diversity.

The total area legally designated for and owned by Indigenous Peoples, and other customary communities, has increased by 103 million hectares since 2015 (based on 73 countries covering 85 percent of global land area) (RRI, 2023).

Similarly, in the context of mapped lands, there has been a gradual increase in land-titling claims and in formal processes of land administration and recognition worldwide (see Figure 5.5).

Figure 5.5. Evolution of mapped Indigenous People's, and other customary communities', land



Source: LandMark. 2024. LandMark: The Global Platform of Indigenous and Community Lands. Available at: ***http://www.landmarkmap.org*** [Accessed on 2 October 2024]

Recognition of customary land rights

Of the total LandMark dataset, where the governance status of customary lands has been determined and mapped, more than a quarter are unrecognized by governments. Oceania, Latin America, and the Caribbean have the highest proportion of acknowledged customary lands. Given the unknown official governance status of indicative managed lands, areas spanning unrecognized customary lands are much higher.

An estimated 49 percent of customary lands globally are unrecognized. Many of these areas are concentrated in Africa, where 73 percent of mapped Indigenous Peoples', and other customary communities', lands are unrecognized. In comparison, 23 percent and 24 percent are unrecognized in Asia and Latin America, respectively. The recognized land percentage for Asia and Latin America is skewed by countries such as China, Brazil, and Mexico. These figures are consistent with the overall data on the proportion of total customary lands worldwide that are legally recognized (See Chapter 3, Figure 3.2).

Resource rights

Recognized customary land rights are crucial for securing and exercising broader tenure rights, including over forests, water[5], and carbon (RRI, 2025). As noted above, these rights encompass a bundle of legal entitlements, including access, withdrawal, management, exclusion, alienation, duration, due process, and compensation. They encompass both surface and subsurface resources, such as trees, wildlife, water, minerals, and, increasingly, carbon rights (Felicani-Robles, 2024). This legal recognition extends not only to land but also to associated resources and ecosystem services.

Since the 1980s and 1990s, state decentralization and organized demands for tenure recognition and resource democratization have led to a significant trend toward devolving and restoring customary forest rights in tropical regions (Agrawal and Ostrom, 2001; Agrawal, 2007; Larson *et al.*, 2010; Sunderlin, 2011; Lawry *et al.*, 2012). Climate policies, such as the Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD+) initiative, have further incentivized customary land titling, with countries like Peru and Guyana linking large-scale land titling programs to access climate finance.

These efforts have yielded substantial progress. A Rights and Resources Initiative (RRI) study across 41 countries reported a 40 percent increase, adding about 150 million hectares globally, in the forest area legally recognized as designated for or owned by Indigenous Peoples, and other customary communities, between 2002 and 2017 (RRI, 2018). This brought the proportion of the world's forests under legal ownership or designation for customary forest communities to 15.3 percent, or 521 million hectares (RRI, 2019). Community forest ownership has increased significantly in Africa, Asia, and particularly in Latin America (RRI, 2018).

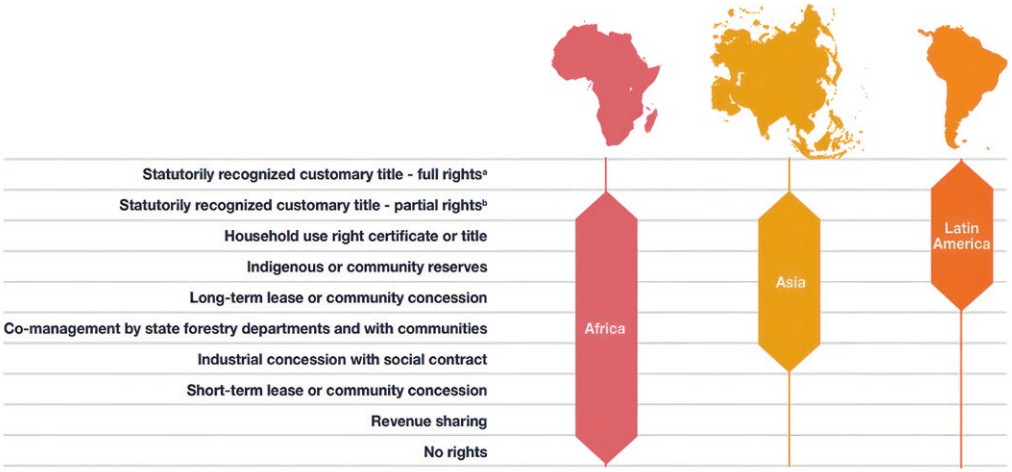
Forest tenure reforms have created varied legal pathways for communities to access, manage, benefit from, and own forests and their resources (see Figure 5.6). These include community forest management, social forestry, land titling, management permits, and co-management arrangements (Ribot and Larson, 2005; Larson *et al.*, 2010; Alden Wily, 2021; Myers *et al.*, 2022).

Despite the legislative prevalence of these arrangements, governments continue to administer an estimated 73 percent of forestland (RRI, 2018).

5 According to RRI and ELI (2020), communities' rights to use and govern freshwater exist in 14 of the 15 countries analyzed, but considerable legislative gaps and administrative burdens commonly hinder their ability to effectively manage and protect their freshwater resources. However, the extent of the legal recognition of these rights to water remains largely unknown and unmonitored.

More recently, with the emergence of Payment for Ecosystem Services (PES) and REDD+ mechanisms, efforts have turned to addressing carbon rights. In many countries, legal systems have yet to specifically address rights to carbon or emissions reductions (ERs) (Streck, 2020; Felicani-Robles, 2024). A study by RRI in 31 countries (representing 70 percent of the world's tropical forests) found that only around a quarter of countries explicitly recognize the rights of communities to govern and benefit from carbon rights (Table 5.3). Examples include Ethiopia, Peru, the Republic of the Congo, Brazil, Colombia, and Costa Rica (RRI, 2021). Overall, few countries explicitly recognize community carbon rights, and even fewer have tested the operational and political feasibility of established rules (RRI and McGill University, 2021).

Figure 5.6. Major approaches to governance devolution



Arrows indicate location approaches along the rights continuum. Gaps indicate approaches that are absent or infrequent.

[a] Full rights include use/access, management, exclusion, and within community rights of alienation. Occasionally includes rights of alienation outside the community.

[b] Partial rights include use/access, management, and (sometimes) exclusion rights.

Source: Lawry *et al.*, 2012a. *Devolution of forest rights and sustainable forest management, Vol. 1: A review of policies and programs in 16 developing countries and Vol. 2: Case studies*. United States Agency for International Development (USAID), Washington, DC.

Source: Sander, Childress, Corcoran and Kimaren ole Riamit, 2025. Collective tenure rights and climate action in sub-Saharan Africa – What are priority investments in rights to achieve long-term sustainability of forest areas? Rome. *https://openknowledge.fao.org/items/941f48b7-00db-400d-9116-57d3114df0ab*

Table 5.3. Levels of carbon rights recognition in key tropical forest countries

	Are carbon rights defined?			
	Prohibition on the sale of carbon	**Carbon rights inconclusive or undefined**	**Carbon rights inferred**	**Carbon rights explicitly defined**
Who holds carbon rights?	*Inconclusive/ Not defined*			
	■ Bolivia (Plurinational State of)	■ Cambodia ■ Cameroon ■ Central African Republic ■ Côte d'Ivoire ■ Honduras ■ Indonesia ■ Mexico ■ Mongolia ■ Papua New Guinea Philippines ■ Suriname ■ Thailand ■ Gabon Guyana	■ Dominican Republic	
	Carbon owned by the State			
			■ Lao People's Democratic Republic ■ Viet Nam – legal transfer of rights to communities possible	■ Democratic Republic of the Congo ■ Nepal – legal transfer of rights to communities possible ■ Zambia – legal transfer of rights to communities possible
	Carbon can be tied to designated community land/forest rights			
			■ Bhutan ■ Fiji ■ Nicaragua	■ Republic of the Congo ■ Ethiopia
	Carbon can be tied to community land/forest ownership			
			■ United Republic of Tanzania	■ Brazil ■ Colombia ■ Costa Rica ■ Peru

Source: RRI. 2021. Status of Legal Recognition of Indigenous Peoples', Local Communities' and Afro-descendant Peoples' Rights to Carbon Stored in Tropical Lands and Forests. Rights and Resources Initiative. ***https://rightsandresources.org/wp-content/uploads/CarbonRightsReport_v10.pdf***

Latin America

During the wave of land reforms that swept Latin America in the 1990s and 2000s, most countries in the region made significant strides in granting local communities strong legal framework rights to customarily managed land (Bryan, 2012; Pacheco *et al.*, 2021). Recognition increased markedly, especially between 2013 and 2017 (RRI, 2018), with ownership and management rights now covering 40 percent of forests in the region. Land tenure recognition is often tied to conservation goals. For instance, in the Amazon, titling programmes aim to combat deforestation by supporting the stewardship of Indigenous Peoples. Latin America stands out for having more advanced systems that recognize and document customary land tenure than those in Africa and Asia. Customarily managed land is relatively well documented and protected in Latin America, with constitutional protections and laws that recognize the lands of Indigenous Peoples in Brazil, Bolivia (Plurinational State of), and Colombia. Despite this progress, enforcement remains inconsistent, with conflicts arising from overlapping land rights with extractive industries (FAO and FILAC, 2021).

Africa

Since 1990, 30 out of 54 African countries have advanced in recognizing customary land rights (Alden Wily, 2021). African governments are increasingly recognizing customary land rights within legal frameworks, as seen in Kenya's Community Land Act of 2016. Efforts to address gender disparities in land access are also expanding, with initiatives designed to improve women's legal and practical access to communal lands and resources. Sierra Leone's Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Act of 2021 is a notable example of such progress. Additionally, there is growing promotion of community-managed protected areas and concessions. The recently announced Coulour Vert corridor in the Democratic Republic of the Congo – which spans over 540 000 square kilometres – illustrates this trend (Rainforest Foundation UK, 2025).

Despite positive steps by some countries, resulting in progress in lands designated for communities (for example, in Zambia, the United Republic of Tanzania, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo through local community forest concessions), the recognition of communities' forest rights in Africa still lags behind progress made in Asia and Latin America (RRI, 2018). In many African countries, communal lands lack full property rights, clear boundaries, and legal security. Communities frequently face limited legal support, difficulties in land registration, and gaps in essential regulations and enforcement (RRI, 2023). Significant deficiencies persist in both the legal frameworks and the implementation of protections for customary forest rights. Although few countries in Africa have specific laws safeguarding Indigenous Peoples' land rights, initiatives like the Democratic Republic of the Congo's Law No. 22/030, which protects the rights of groups such as the Pygmy peoples, offer a promising step toward change.

Legal pluralism in sub-Saharan Africa often means communities hold partial or customary rights recognized by governments, although these rarely constitute formal property rights. As a result, communities remain vulnerable when governments grant land-use rights to external parties, which can undermine local tenure security.

Asia

Statutory recognition of community forest tenure in Asia advanced modestly between 2002 and 2017, with China accounting for 85 percent (21 million ha) of the gains (RRI, 2018). Currently, 38 percent of Asia's forestland falls under the tenure of Indigenous Peoples, and other customary communities, either through ownership or designation. Nepal stands out as a model: Over 40 percent of the national forests are managed by customary communities through community forestry programmes introduced since the late 1980s (Ministry of Forest and Environment, Nepal Annual Report 2024). However, overall regional progress has been slower than in other regions, with only a 24 percent increase in recognized tenure areas from 2002 to 2017 (RRI, 2018).

Recognition of Indigenous Peoples' tenure rights varies widely. Countries such as India (for example, the Forest Rights Act of 2006) and the Philippines have established legal frameworks that affirm Indigenous Peoples' land claims. Others, such as Indonesia, often categorize Indigenous Peoples as ethnic minorities or tribes, limiting their rights (Hadiprayitno, 2017). Social forestry schemes are prevalent across Asia, but they tend to grant limited rights and low community ownership compared with other regions (Rincón Barajas, Kubitza and Lay, 2024). These community lands frequently overlap with state forest areas. For example, 24 percent of the Lao People's Democratic Republic's population lives in state-designated forests. Nearly 40 million Indonesians live similarly, yet few have recognized, secure tenure (Kukkonen, Antos and van der Muur, 2024). Significant implementation gaps and bureaucratic delays continue to hinder effective recognition.

Contributions of customary managed lands

Knowledge systems and stewardship

Customary communities play a vital role in shaping and sustaining landscapes through customary governance and traditional ecological knowledge (Comberti *et al.*, 2015). Their customarily managed lands support sustainable land and resource use, contributing to global goals related to climate change, biodiversity, and land degradation (Sauls, Galeana and Lawry, 2022).

These systems are rooted in long-standing institutions and practices, such as agroforestry, shifting cultivation, and sustainable harvesting, which help protect fragile ecosystems, including tropical forests and grasslands (Gibson *et al.*, 2005; RRI, 2015; Sauls, Galeana and Lawry, 2022). Informal social controls and local customary actions can also prevent resource degradation (Ostrom, 1990, as cited in Robinson, Holland and Naughton-Treves, 2014).

Traditional ecological knowledge, often tied to cultural beliefs (such as reciprocity and forest spirits), guides responsible resource use and supports ecosystem health (Comberti *et al.*, 2015; Berkes, 2017). Evidence shows that customary governance can be more effective at preventing deforestation and habitat loss than private or state management (Oldekop *et al.*, 2019; FAO and FILAC, 2021; Qin *et al.*, 2023). For instance, in Brazil, only 1 percent of native vegetation was lost from Indigenous Peoples' lands over 30 years, compared to 20.6 percent in private lands.

Evidence suggests that traditional land-use practices, including fire management, soil enhancement, and landscape engineering, have a significant impact on biodiversity and ecosystem structure (Trauernicht *et al.*, 2015). For instance, Indigenous Peoples' fire regimes shape habitat heterogeneity, while practices such as terra preta in the Amazon and earthworks in Bolivia (Plurinational State of) improve soil fertility and water management.

The domestication and management of plants and animals by Indigenous Peoples have contributed to the creation of novel, biodiverse ecosystems (Comberti *et al.*, 2015; Reyes-Garcia *et al.*, 2019). Cultivating species such as Brazil nuts supports biodiversity and ecosystem services, including seed dispersal and nutrient cycling (IPBES, 2019; Swiderska *et al.*, 2021). Agroforestry and rotational cultivation systems also enhance biodiversity, resilience to climate risks, and livelihood diversification (Wartenberg *et al.*, 2017; Libert-Amico *et al.*, 2022).

Ecosystem maintenance

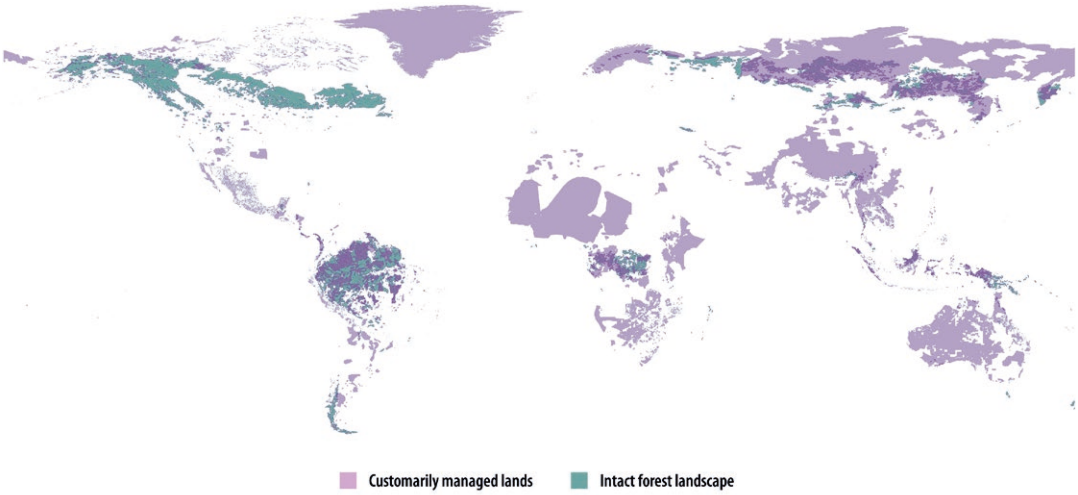
As noted before, lands held by Indigenous Peoples, and other customary communities, overlap much of the world's forests, which are central to global climate and biodiversity efforts. These forests act as major carbon sinks (Baccini *et al.*, 2017; Funk *et al.*, 2019) and help regulate climate through both carbon and non-carbon processes, such as evapotranspiration, albedo, and aerosols (Lawrence *et al.*, 2022; FAO, 2024). They are also critical for biodiversity conservation (Fa *et al.*, 2020) and climate adaptation (Libert-Amico *et al.*, 2022).

Forests also support key ecosystem services essential to food security, livelihoods, and national economies, benefiting over a billion people globally (Ickowitz *et al.*, 2022; Mo *et al.*, 2023).

Community-managed forests and agroforestry systems enhance resilience, buffering against climate impacts such as floods, landslides, and erosion (Scheidl *et al.*, 2020; Libert-Amico *et al.*, 2022). In addition, these landscapes regulate water, support soil formation, and mitigate risks from pests and diseases (Guégan *et al.*, 2020, cited in FAO and FILAC, 2021). They enable nature-based livelihoods, from ecotourism to non-timber forest products, which are essential to health, food, and energy security. The ecosystem services provided by these lands have been valued at USD 1.16 trillion annually (Sangha, 2020).

Approximately 40 percent of the world's total Intact Forest Landscape (IFL) area, equivalent to an estimated 1.13 billion hectares, overlaps with mapped lands held and managed by customary communities (Figure 5.7; Table 5.4).

Figure 5.7. Forest land overlapping with mapped customarily managed lands



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Source: Authors' own elaboration based on LandMark (LandMark. 2024. LandMark: The Global Platform of Indigenous and Community Lands. Available at: ***http://www.landmarkmap.org***); Garnett *et al.* (Garnett, S.T., Burgess, N.D., Fa, J.E. *et al.* A spatial overview of the global importance of Indigenous lands for conservation. Nat Sustain 1, 369–374 (2018). ***https://doi.org/10.1038/s41893-018-0100-6***); Potapov *et al.* (Potapov, P., Hansen, M.C., Laestadius, L., Turubanova, S., Yaroshenko, A., Thies, C., Smith, W. *et al.* 2017. The last frontiers of wilderness: Tracking loss of intact forest landscapes from 2000 to 2013. Science Advances, 3(1): e1600821. ***https://doi.org/10.1126/sciadv.1600821***)

In the Amazon region alone, customary lands account for 45 percent of all remaining intact forests, underscoring their critical role in conserving some of the most ecologically valuable forest ecosystems (FAO and FILAC, 2021).

In addition, 32 percent of the world's stable forests (those least at risk of land-use conversion) are located within customarily managed territories, particularly those governed by Indigenous Peoples (Funk *et al.*, 2019). These forests are generally the least affected by drivers such as urban expansion, transport infrastructure, industrial agriculture, and large-scale resource extraction, making them essential for long-term ecosystem integrity (Kennedy *et al.*, 2023).

Table 5.4. Forest land overlapping with customarily managed lands

IFL (ha)	Customary lands percentage of global IFL	Customary lands percentage of total country mapped IFL	IFL percentage of mapped customary lands	Stable forest (ha)	Percentage of global stable forest	Percentage of total stable forests in mapped countries	Percentage of stable forest only in mapped customary lands
Other customary communities							
75 724 012	6.7%	6.9%	40.7%	245 273 284	6.8%	7.52%	22%
Indigenous Peoples							
369 169 114	32.8%	33.4%	34.6%	895 029 141	24.98%	27.44%	28%

Source: Authors' own elaboration based on LandMark (LandMark. 2024. LandMark: The Global Platform of Indigenous and Community Lands. Available at: ***http://www.landmarkmap.org***); Garnett *et al.* (Garnett, S.T., Burgess, N.D., Fa, J.E. *et al.* A spatial overview of the global importance of Indigenous lands for conservation. Nat Sustain 1, 369–374 (2018). ***https://doi.org/10.1038/s41893-018-0100-6***); Potapov *et al.* (Potapov, P., Hansen, M.C., Laestadius, L., Turubanova, S., Yaroshenko, A., Thies, C., Smith, W. *et al.* 2017. The last frontiers of wilderness: Tracking loss of intact forest landscapes from 2000 to 2013. Science Advances, 3(1): e1600821. ***https://doi.org/10.1126/sciadv.1600821***).

Biodiversity conservation

Traditional knowledge plays a crucial role in conserving biodiversity and preventing habitat loss (IPBES, 2019). Through land-based practices and adaptive management, customary communities actively maintain, restore, and enhance ecosystems, often increasing biodiversity at the landscape level (Reyes-García *et al.*, 2019; Ogar, Pecl and Mustonen, 2020). In Nepal, for instance, community forest tenure reforms have improved ecosystem services, including biodiversity and climate resilience (Luintel, Bluffstone and Scheller, 2018; Oldekop *et al.*, 2019).

While the frequently cited claim that 80 percent of global biodiversity is found on Indigenous Peoples' lands lacks empirical basis (Fernández-Llamazares *et al.*, 2024), evidence shows that these territories, under customary tenure, harbour significant biological richness (IPBES, 2019; Estrada *et al.*, 2022). In Brazil, for example, Indigenous Peoples' lands host more mammal, bird, reptile, and amphibian species than all non-Indigenous Peoples' protected areas combined (Schuster *et al.*, 2019, as cited in FAO and FILAC, 2021).

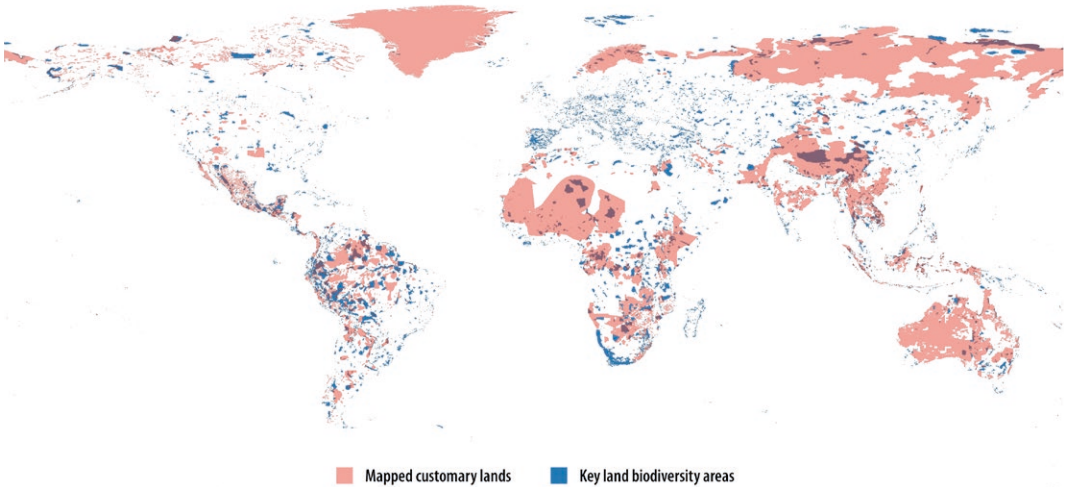
Customarily managed lands overlap with 33 percent of the world's critical biodiversity habitats, as defined by IUCN's Key Biodiversity Areas (KBAs), covering over 400 million hectares of these globally vital ecosystems (Figure 5.8). This substantial overlap underscores the indispensable role these communities play in safeguarding the planet's most threatened and ecologically significant habitats.

When limiting data analysis to only include KBAs located in countries for which map coverage exists, customary lands overlap with an estimated 40 percent of KBAs; 84 percent in the case of only collectively managed lands (Table 5.5).

Table 5.5. Overlap of Key Biodiversity Areas and customary lands

KBA (ha)	Customary lands as percentage of global KBA	Customary lands as percentage of total country mapped KBA	KBA percentage of mapped customary lands
Customary communities			
79 642 530	6.2%	7.5%	57.6%
Indigenous Peoples			
344 435 707	27%	32.3%	25%
Total customary lands	**33.2%**	**39.7%**	**83.7%**

Figure 5.8. Key biodiversity areas in mapped customary lands



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Climate change mitigation

Customary lands are vital contributors to climate change mitigation. Forests across tropical, temperate, and boreal zones under Indigenous Peoples' governance play a critical role in long-term carbon storage, water regulation, and climate processes (Ellison *et al.*, 2017; Yáñez-Serrano *et al.*, 2020; Kruid *et al.*, 2021). Forests absorb up to 30 percent of annual global CO_2 emissions and serve as stable carbon reservoirs (Baccini *et al.*, 2017; Funk *et al.*, 2019; Pan *et al.*, 2024). Similarly, natural and semi-natural grasslands, which are crucial to many Indigenous Peoples' pastoralist livelihoods, serve as important carbon sinks, holding 12 percent of terrestrial carbon, despite their low protection levels (Carbutt *et al.*, 2017; Bengtsson *et al.*, 2019; Lyons *et al.*, 2023). The sustainable management of these areas by Indigenous Peoples communities is increasingly recognized (Lyons *et al.*, 2023).

Currently mapped customary territories hold an estimated 50.63 gigatons of irrecoverable carbon, defined as carbon that cannot be replaced by mid-century (Noon et al., 2021). This represents 37 percent of the total global irrecoverable carbon (Figure 5.9; Table 5.6).

Forest biomes dominate this carbon storage capacity, accounting for 85 percent of the total (Table 5.7). These findings are consistent with other recent estimates, which indicate that customarily managed lands store approximately 22 percent of the world's forest carbon (217 991 Mt C) in above-ground biomass within tropical forests (RRI *et al.*, 2016; Frechette *et al.*, 2018; RRI, 2018). This underscores the critical role Indigenous Peoples' stewardship plays in preserving irreplaceable carbon stocks, which are essential for maintaining climate stability.

Additionally, 78 percent of the carbon in terrestrial wetlands is stored in peatland ecosystems, which account for up to 21 percent of global soil organic carbon (Leifeld and Menichetti, 2018). These ecosystems are vital for climate regulation through their control of water and temperature (Strack *et al.*, 2022).

Peatlands are vital to Indigenous Peoples' communities (Speller and Forbes, 2022), and their degradation significantly drives greenhouse gas emissions, making restoration and management crucial for climate mitigation, often supported by Indigenous Peoples' stewardship (Harris *et al.*, 2021). Customarily managed lands contain 80 percent of global peatlands (about 390 million hectares), accounting for 29 percent of irrecoverable carbon under customary tenure (Table 5.7).

Figure 5.9. Irrecoverable carbon stocks in mapped Indigenous People´s, and other customary communities´, lands

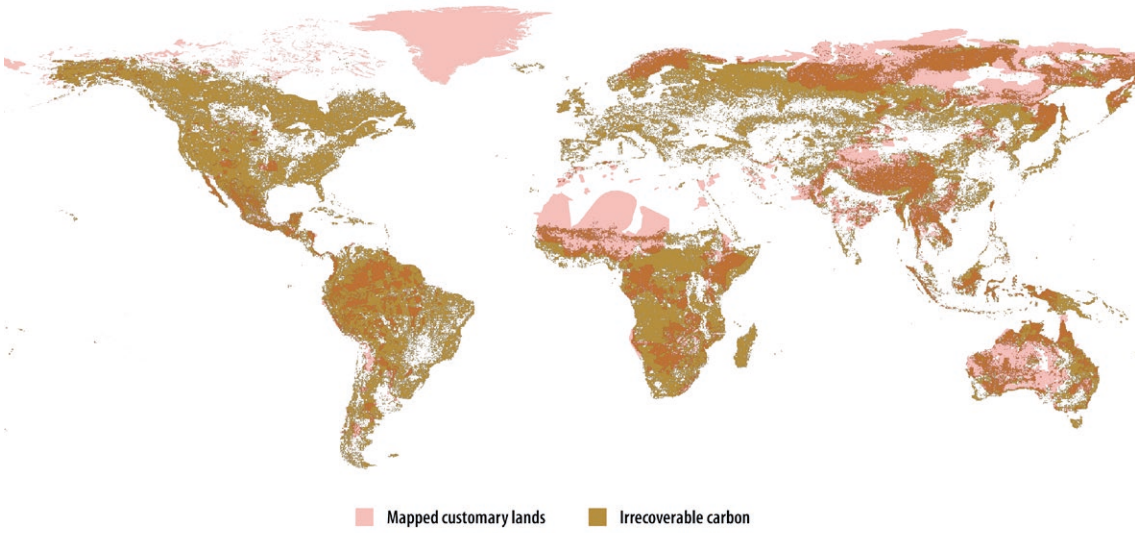

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Table 5.6. Irrecoverable carbon stocks in mapped Indigenous People's, and other customary communities', lands

	Irrecoverable carbon (ton)	percentage of total irrecoverable carbon (ton)	percentage of total IC in mapped IPLC
Customary communities	10 909 181 930	8%	5.9%
Indigenous Peoples	39 716 732 833	29%	34.2%
	50 625 914 765	37%	40.1%

Sources: Authors' own elaboration based on LandMark (LandMark. 2024. LandMark: The Global Platform of Indigenous and Community Lands. Available at: ***http://www.landmarkmap.org***); Garnett *et al.* (Garnett, S.T., Burgess, N.D., Fa, J.E. *et al.* A spatial overview of the global importance of Indigenous lands for conservation. Nat Sustain 1, 369–374 (2018). ***https://doi.org/10.1038/s41893-018-0100-6***); Olson *et al.* (Olson, D. M., Dinerstein, E., Wikramanayake, E. D., Burgess, N. D., Powell, G. V. N., Underwood, E. C., D'Amico, J. A., Itoua, I., Strand, H. E., Morrison, J. C., Loucks, C. J., Allnutt, T. F., Ricketts, T. H., Kura, Y., Lamoreux, J. F., Wettengel, W. W., Hedao, P., Kassem, K. R. 2001. Terrestrial ecoregions of the world: a new map of life on Earth. Bioscience 51(11):933-938 ***https://doi.org/10.1641/0006-3568(2001)051***[0933:TEOTWA]2.0.CO;2); and Noon *et al.* (Noon, M., Goldstein, A., Ledezma, J. C., Roehrdanz, P., Cook-Patton, S. C., Spawn-Lee, S. A., Wright, T. M., Gonzalez-Roglich, M., Hole, D. G., Rockström, J., & Turner, W. R. (2021). Mapping the irrecoverable carbon in Earth's ecosystems (1.0) Irrecoverable Carbon 2010. Zenodo. ***https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.4091029***).

Table 5.7. Irrecoverable carbon stocks in total customary lands disaggregated by biomes/ecosystems (%)

Biomes / ecosystems	% of carbon stocks in customary lands
Coastal and inland coasts, Mangroves	1%
Deserts / Xeric Shrublands	1%
Glacial / Tundra	4%
Grasslands / Shrublands / Savana	8%
Forests (temperate and tropical, Med.)	85%
Peatlands*	29%

Sources: Authors' own elaboration based on LandMark (LandMark. 2024. LandMark: The Global Platform of Indigenous and Community Lands. Available at: ***http://www.landmarkmap.org***); Garnett *et al.* (Garnett, S.T., Burgess, N.D., Fa, J.E. *et al.* A spatial overview of the global importance of Indigenous lands for conservation. Nat Sustain 1, 369–374 (2018). ***https://doi.org/10.1038/s41893-018-0100-6***); Olson *et al.* (Olson, D. M., Dinerstein, E., Wikramanayake, E. D., Burgess, N. D., Powell, G. V. N., Underwood, E. C., D'Amico, J. A., Itoua, I., Strand, H. E., Morrison, J. C., Loucks, C. J., Allnutt, T. F., Ricketts, T. H., Kura, Y., Lamoreux, J. F., Wettengel, W. W., Hedao, P., Kassem, K. R. 2001. Terrestrial ecoregions of the world: a new map of life on Earth. Bioscience 51(11):933-938 ***https://doi.org/10.1641/0006-3568(2001)051***[0933:TEOTWA]2.0.CO;2); and Noon *et al.* (Noon, M., Goldstein, A., Ledezma, J. C., Roehrdanz, P., Cook-Patton, S. C., Spawn-Lee, S. A., Wright, T. M., Gonzalez-Roglich, M., Hole, D. G., Rockström, J., & Turner, W. R. (2021). Mapping the irrecoverable carbon in Earth's ecosystems (1.0) Irrecoverable Carbon 2010. Zenodo. ***https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.4091029***).

Challenges and pressures on customary lands

Managing customary lands for climate and environmental goals may also involve significant opportunity costs and socio-economic trade-offs, such as disparities in income and access to essential services, including sanitation (den Braber *et al.*, 2024). Because securing tenure rights can, at times, limit local economic options or exacerbate internal inequalities, it is essential to critically examine issues such as uneven resource access, the risk of land pressures under climate goals, and the balance between climate objectives and the subsistence needs of local people (World Bank, 2021). Understanding the challenges and pressures, as well as 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.

Climate and anthropogenic pressures

Customary territories exist within highly politicized and dynamic contexts, shaped by state-building, global resource governance, and competing pressures from extractive industries, conservation efforts, and climate mitigation initiatives. Fueled by global commodity booms, they are often targeted by state- and corporate-led development agendas that prioritize large-scale agriculture, mining, and fossil fuel extraction – frequently at the expense of environmental sustainability and community rights (Fernandez-Llamazares *et al.*, 2020). On one hand, the resulting degradation, deforestation, and pollution endanger livelihoods, health, and well-being. On the other hand, since customary rights are frequently not secured, not respected, or violated, these dynamics can lead to land dispossession and unequal resource control (Pacheco *et al.*, 2012; Nolten *et al.*, 2016; Wolford *et al.*, 2016, 2024; Liao *et al.*, 2021; Sauls, Galeana and Lawry, 2022).

Composite risk analyses[6] (Young *et al.*, 2023; Strata, 2024) – which combine climate and environmental indicators such as drought, heatwaves, deforestation, and coastal inundation, and are mapped against Indigenous Peoples', and other customary communities', territories – highlight that socio-economic risks, linked to food insecurity, population growth, irrigation stress, urban expansion, and water scarcity, are especially acute in customary lands in Africa (Figure 5.10 and Figure 5.11). A global study by Kennedy *et al.* (2023) finds that nearly 60 percent of customary lands across 64 countries are threatened by industrial activities, driven by renewable energy projects (42 percent), oil and gas extraction (18 percent), commercial agriculture (14 percent), mining (9 percent), and urbanization (4 percent).

Newer pressures stem from the green economy. Land-based climate solutions such as renewable energy, biofuels, conservation, and carbon offset projects, often backed by international finance, are expanding land use claims (Owen *et al.*, 2018, 2022; Sauls, Galeana and Lawry, 2022; Bourgoin *et al.*, 2024). In their Land Gap report, Dooley *et al.* (2022) estimate the area of land required to meet projected biological carbon removal in national climate pledges and commitments at almost 1.2 billion hectares (ha), which is close to the extent of current global cropland (Dooley *et al.*, 2022). This global land rush driven by large-scale land acquisitions (LSLAs), often linked to climate policy securitization, has been characterized as 'green grabbing' (Fairhead, Leach and Scoones, 2012; Büscher, 2024), 'green extractivism' (Bruna, 2022a; Lang, Managan and Bringel, 2024), and 'carbon colonialism' (Lyons and Westoby, 2014; Borras and Franco, 2024; Wolford *et al.*, 2024).

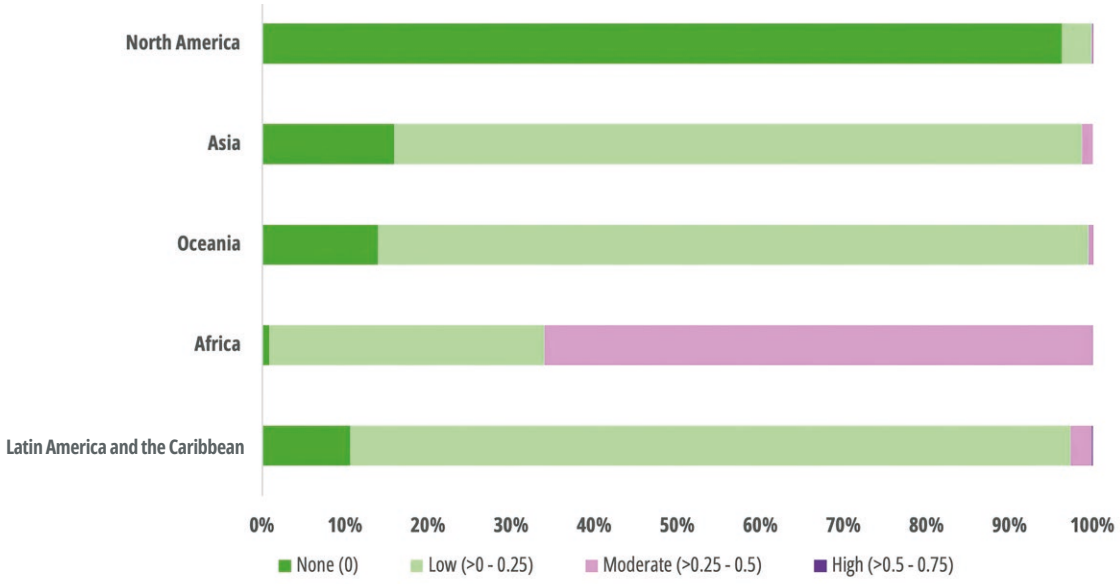
6 UNEP´s Strata climate & environment hotspot maps (Strata 2024; Young *et al.* 2023) are used as a proxy indicator to evaluate global hotspot areas of particularly high climatic and ecological risk. Strata integrates multiple global data layers documenting agricultural stress, drought and flooding risks, deforestation, and land degradation to generate a composite climate and environment risk. Strata's hotspot analysis is based on the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's (IPCC's) definition of risk as the product of hazard, exposure, and vulnerability. Where there is a high convergence of those risk factors, the location is marked as a hotspot.

Figure 5.10. Climate and Environment stress flags in customary lands globally

Note: Climate & Environment is a simple sum of the number of indicators. Areas of concern are those locations where the most thresholds have been crossed, based on the sum of "red flags" that occur whenever climate, environmental, or security indicators cross predetermined thresholds. See Young *et al.* (2023) for further information.

Source: UNEP Strata 2024. United Nations Environment Programme. ***unepstrata.org*** [Accessed on: 31 October 2024]

Figure 5.11. Vulnerability risks across mapped customary lands globally



Note: The overall socioeconomic vulnerability score between 0 and 1 is calculated as Vulnerability score = (number of vulnerability flags a location receives+1) / (total number of vulnerability indicators+1).

Source: UNEP Strata 2024. United Nations Environment Programme. ***unepstrata.org*** [Accessed on: 31 October 2024]

Paradoxically, the surge in climate mitigation and conservation initiatives aiming to protect ecosystems and address climate change is placing intense pressure on customary lands, especially (but not only) those that lack formal recognition or protections (Bruna, 2022a, 2022b; Rodriguez de Francisco *et al.*, 2021; Bourgoin *et al.*, 2024). The Land Matrix records 122 large-scale carbon/REDD projects in Africa, Asia, and Latin America covering nearly 8 million ha (Hennings and Baquero, 2024). Recent mega-deals, such as those by the United Arab Emirates-based Blue Carbon in Kenya, Zimbabwe, Liberia, and the United Republic of Tanzania, involve claims to vast carbon rights, including up to one-fifth of Zimbabwe's land, for example (Pearce, 2023).

These dynamics have disproportionately affected customary lands, displacing communities, eroding governance systems, and intensifying inequality, particularly for women (Silva Santisteban, 2020; Bringel and Svampa, 2023; UNFPA, 2023). The proliferation of these carbon offset schemes has drawn increasing scrutiny, particularly when they target lands belonging to customary communities whose rights remain insecure (McAfee, 2016; Delacote, Le Velly and Simonet, 2022; Haya *et al.*, 2023). Projects such as REDD+ frequently suffer from inadequate community participation, absence of FPIC, and inequitable benefit-sharing (Sarmiento Barletti and Larson, 2017; Dunne and Quiroz, 2023; Survival International, 2023). Many are dominated by international brokers (Aguilar-Støen, 2017; Hatcher, Owen and Yin, 2021). These arrangements have led to human rights violations, including violence, land appropriation, forced evictions, imprisonment, and social conflict (Collins, 2020). Women leaders resisting land incursions have been particularly targeted in numerous cases (Scheidel *et al.*, 2020; Global Witness, 2023; Rincón Barajas, Kubitza and Lay, 2024). Reports also highlight corruption, illegal logging, elite capture, and disruption of traditional livelihoods (Duchelle *et al.*, 2017; Alusiola *et al.*, 2021; Kapos *et al.*, 2022; RFUK, 2022), with carbon contracts and restrictions on forest practices often weakening socioecological resilience and community governance (Hajjar *et al.*, 2021).

Socio-cultural change

The combined impacts of climate change, biodiversity loss, land degradation, and increasing resource pressures – intensified by market integration, expanding connectivity, and socioeconomic change – are straining traditional socio-cultural systems. These forces are reshaping resource management practices and driving shifts toward more market-oriented livelihoods and new aspirations for well-being (WWF *et al.*, 2021). Changes are already visible in the decline of traditional subsistence practices, such as hunting, fishing, and gathering, replaced in many areas by wage labour and agricultural commodity production.

While many customary tenure systems remain well-managed and resilient, others struggle to navigate the complex demands of and pressures on collective land management. Capacity challenges of customary institutions are often attributed to a

combination of factors, including a lack of formalization, inadequate representation, insufficient skills, limited financial resources, and difficulties in balancing private and collective interests (Sander *et al.*, 2025). These tensions pose challenges not only for the continuity of cultural identity and local autonomy but also for environmental and social sustainability. While customary tenure systems can serve as crucial foundations for environmental conservation and climate action, their effectiveness is often strained (Sander *et al.*, 2025).

This situation is especially evident under increasing market and external governance pressures. Tensions can arise when communities prioritize short-term economic gains over long-term sustainability, as seen in community forestry in the Democratic Republic of Congo. While community forestry in the Democratic Republic of the Congo has the potential to support both economic development and environmental sustainability, immediate needs for income often lead to unsustainable practices such as over-harvesting timber or encroaching on forest areas (Rainforest Foundation UK, 2018).

These challenges are further compounded by political and epistemological barriers, including the persistent marginalization of Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK), which is often discredited as unscientific despite its proven value in sustainable resource management (Berkes, 2017). Such perceptions influence not only policies but also community and external attitudes toward land use and management.

Demographic shifts and rural outmigration, particularly among younger generations, contribute to the erosion of customary tenure systems and the loss of traditional knowledge vital for the continuity of communal governance and sustainable land use (Sarigumba *et al.*, 2023). Urban migration is an increasingly prevalent trend among customary communities, driven by diverse factors, including conflict, climate change, dispossession, socioeconomic inequality, and lack of access to public services and employment opportunities (World Bank, 2015). In Latin America, although many Indigenous Peoples maintain close relationships with their ancestral customary lands, nearly half (49 percent) now reside in urban areas (World Bank, 2017).

As young people pursue education and livelihoods in urban centres and are absorbed into formalized systems, they often adopt new values and lifestyles that may diverge from their cultural traditions (Ninkova *et al.*, 2024). This shift contributes to a gradual loss of heritage, identity, and connection to ancestral lands (World Bank, 2023). In Nepal, for instance, rural outmigration and the rise of a remittance-based economy have weakened customary action and led to stagnation in community forestry initiatives (Paudel *et al.*, 2022). Globalization and integration into transnational markets have also driven transformations in lifestyle and livelihood, challenging the authority of customary institutions and reshaping tenure systems (IPBES, 2019). As a result, these systems may no longer function effectively in allocating resources, managing collective lands and resources, or transmitting the traditional knowledge necessary for biodiversity conservation and sustainable environmental stewardship (Reyes-García *et al.*, 2011).

Lack of recognition, partial devolution and inequalities

Although progress has been made, the lack of legal recognition of customary lands remains widespread, with implications for biodiversity conservation and climate action.

Areas of insecure tenure overlap with many of the world's most carbon-rich forests (Bruce *et al.*, 2010). 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. Such unrecognized tenure contributes to insecurity for customary communities and has profound social, environmental, and economic consequences.

Tenure reforms have involved, for the most part, only a partial recognition and devolution of the 'bundle of rights' (Prouchet, Sarmiento Barletti and Larson, 2023), excluding key resources such as carbon (Feliciane, 2024) or subsoil minerals (Bebbington *et al.*, 2018). Overlapping rights are common, as many governments separate land from forest and subsoil rights, allowing extractive concessions even on titled Indigenous Peoples' lands. For instance, mining concessions cover over 18 percent of the Amazon, overlapping more than 20 percent of Indigenous Peoples' lands, while oil and gas concessions overlap 12 percent (Earth Insight, 2024). In Peru, 35 percent of titled Indigenous Peoples' lands are overlapped by extractive concessions (Cuba *et al.*, 2014).

Additionally, legal pluralism, where legal and customary systems overlap, has led to complex and often conflicting tenure arrangements (German *et al.*, 2009). Incoherent policies and unclear laws continue to undermine tenure security for customarily managed lands. Legal pluralism often creates conflict, especially when states fail to mediate between legal and customary systems (Lavigne-Delville, 2017). Governments typically retain authority over land and resources (Larson *et al.*, 2010; Chimhowu, 2019), which undermines community security and enables expropriation or size restrictions on customary tenure (Notess *et al.*, 2018). Externally controlled interventions frequently harm both conservation efforts and community well-being (Dawson *et al.*, 2021).

Overall, despite increasing attention to community rights, forest tenure for collectives often remains weaker than that for companies or individual smallholders (Aggarwal *et al.*, 2021, as cited in Myers *et al.*, 2022). Companies frequently secure formal land rights more quickly because regulatory and policy frameworks tend to prioritize investors over community recognition (Notess *et al.*, 2018).

In some contexts, there is political or bureaucratic resistance to recognizing customary rights (FAO and FILAC, 2021), or even to acknowledging certain groups as Indigenous (IWGIA, 2023).

Customary tenure rights are often excluded from national constitutions, undermined by conflicting laws or unclear institutional frameworks, which stall reform and perpetuate insecurity, inequality, and land occupation (Hänggli *et al.*, 2023).

Moreover, finance for land tenure security remains both insufficient and unequally distributed, with very little funding reaching Indigenous Peoples' communities and organizations directly (Rainforest Foundation Norway, 2021; Cannon, 2022). For example, of the USD 1.7 billion pledged at COP26 in Glasgow, only 2.9 percent of the funds delivered in 2022 went directly to Indigenous Peoples' organizations (Forest Tenure Funders Group, 2023). Most financing is instead channeled through intermediaries, reducing its impact on the ground (Hatcher, Owen and Yin, 2021)[7].

Key policy and legal gaps persist in the recognition of customary tenure rights over territories, lands, and resources, such as forests and carbon, which must be addressed for all rights holders. Inclusion extends to those whose individual rights rely on customary recognition (women and youth) and to groups not yet recognized as rights holders (refugees or displaced populations).

The recognition of individual rights within customary systems, particularly for women and young people, remains also limited (RRI, 2025), raising significant concerns regarding equity and justice. Indigenous women face compounded risks due to gender inequality, colonial histories, and land dispossession. Despite their key roles as biodiversity stewards, seed keepers, and holders of medicinal plant knowledge, they often have less access to land rights, decision-making spaces, and economic resources than Indigenous men (UN Women, 2022; FAO, 2024). Youth, whose involvement is vital for the long-term sustainability of customary governance systems, are frequently excluded from decision-making due to internal norms and hierarchies that prioritize older adult males (Sarigumba *et al.*, 2023).

Customary land tenure systems also face power imbalances that influence how these lands are governed. Equity concerns are widely recognized, particularly regarding norms and practices that discriminate against or exclude certain groups, such as women, youth, or minorities, from decisions about land access, use, and management (Peters, 2004; Cotula, 2007; Knight, 2010).

7 The bulk of international financial support for IPLC tenure and forest management comes through public official development assistance (ODA). These funds are typically channeled through a donor government's development agency. They then go to a series of intermediary organizations that provide technical assistance, project development, and other support to ensure the funds are spent on activities sanctioned by the donor. Intermediaries then often sub-grant the money to local NGOs or Indigenous Peoples', and other local community, organizations.

Governance and institutional challenges

While formalization is an important tool for securing land tenure, strong legal frameworks are often poorly implemented due to technical and financial capacity gaps, bureaucratic hurdles, and political resistance, including lack of will or incentive to enforce customary land rights (Larson and Springer, 2016; Correia, 2019; Sanders *et al.*, 2019; Dest, 2020; McSweeney, 2020; FAO and FILAC, 2021; Sauls, Galeana and Lawry, 2022; Prouchet, Sarmiento Barletti and Larson, 2023).

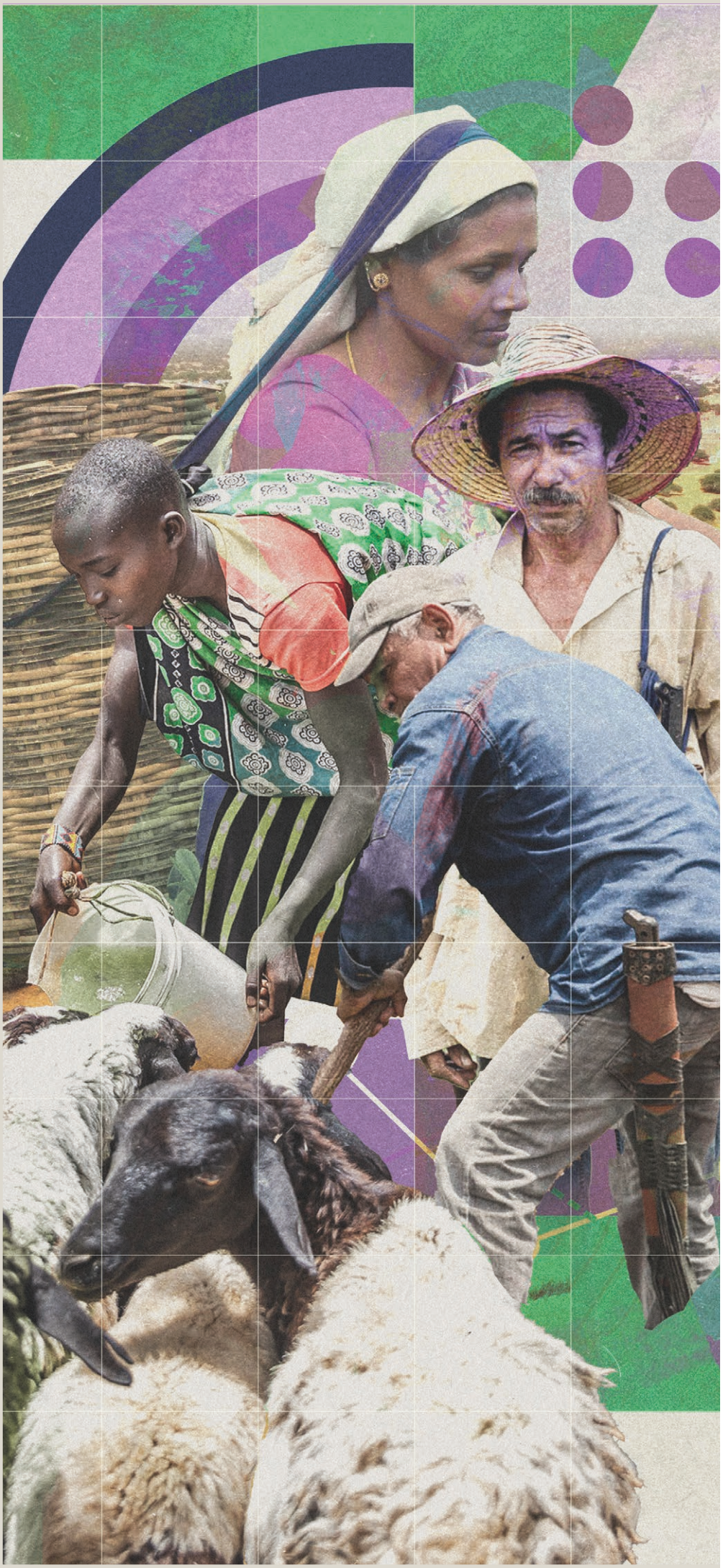
The recognition and enforcement of tenure rights are frequently undermined by weak governance, poor inter-institutional coordination, resource constraints, and broader structural challenges, especially in the face of widespread encroachment pressures (Sauls, Galeana and Lawry, 2020; FAO and FILAC, 2021; Rincón Barajas, Kubitza and Lay, 2024). The problem is particularly evident in communities affected by illegal logging, mining, land invasions, and violent competition over resources from more powerful actors (Monterroso and Larson, 2019; FAO and FILAC, 2021).

In many countries, national laws do not provide mechanisms for registering or titling community land, or return land to communities at the end of a project or concession term. Consequently, vast areas of customary land remain undocumented and unregistered in official cadastres (GLP, 2022). Existing land registries are often incomplete, opaque, and outdated, making it difficult to resolve or prevent overlapping claims and rights.

Although digitization of land registries and cadastres has been introduced to improve mapping and formalization, these systems can deepen inequities when implemented without proper oversight, accessibility, or verification. In some cases, digital tools have legitimized historical land grabs, reinforcing models based on private ownership and marginalizing Indigenous Peoples', and customary, tenure systems (GRAIN, 2020; FIAN International, 2020).

Where land titling exists, it often involves costly, complex, and lengthy procedures with demanding legal, technical, and evidentiary requirements to register lands held informally under customary tenure (FAO and FILAC, 2021; ILC, 2022). For example, in the Philippines, the process requires 56 legally mandated steps; in Indonesia, up to 21 government entities may be involved (Notess *et al.*, 2018). Formalization processes are rarely transparent – communities often cannot correct errors, access information, or understand the reasons behind delays and rejections. They may be excluded from key stages, such as boundary mapping, and competing third-party claims can prevent contested areas from being documented and secured. Additionally, communities may require historic documents to gain legal personality or must form associations with elected representatives (Notess *et al.*, 2018). These formalization efforts create trade-offs: state bureaucratic demands often conflict with traditional governance, eroding local decision-making and reducing communities' ability to manage their lands according to their values and needs. These challenges are especially acute at the local level among community organizations and institutions.

Overall, strengthening customary land governance requires greater transparency and contextual evidence. While links between customary tenure and improved forest outcomes are increasingly recognized (FAO and FILAC, 2021; Sander *et al.*, 2025), the empirical evidence remains mixed. Outcomes vary by region, governance structures, and legal frameworks (Busch and Ferretti-Gallon, 2023). In sub-Saharan Africa, for example, results have been less positive, in part due to complex community dynamics, diverse tenure systems, and limited research (Bromley, 2008; Sander *et al.*, 2025). Customary rights and governance can be crucial for land and natural resource management, but they are not a universal solution or a "panacea" for all challenges. While they can foster self-determination, cultural preservation, and improved governance, they also have limitations and potential drawbacks. As shown in this chapter, implementing customary systems requires strong and respected customary institutions, alignment with existing laws, and ensuring inclusivity and fairness for all members of the community (Ostrom, 1990; Sander *et al.*, 2025).



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

Chapter 6

TRENDS IN LAND TENURE DISTRIBUTION AND CONCENTRATION

6

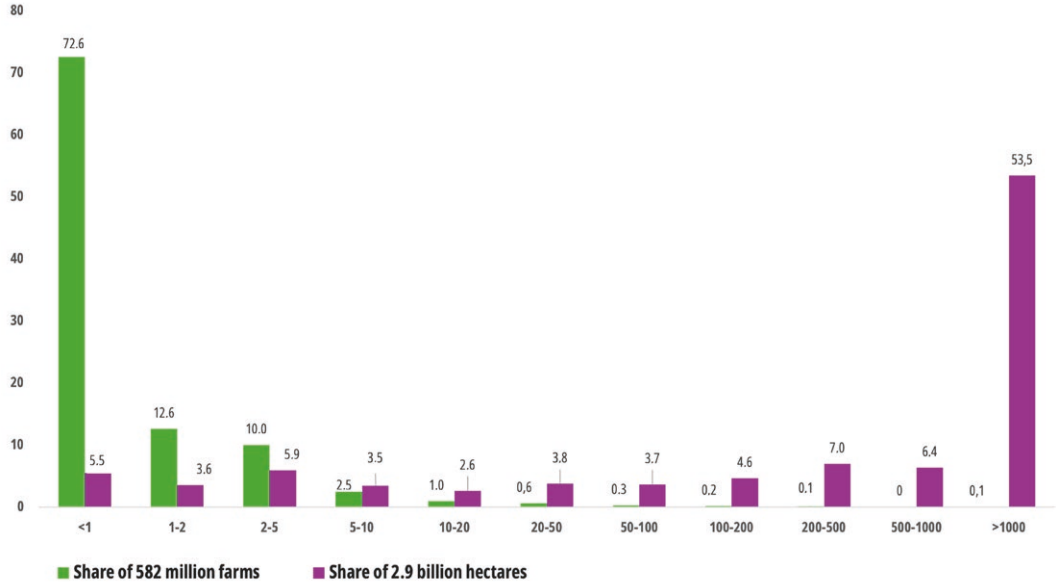
Good measures of the status and evolution of land distribution are central to monitoring land inequality over time, particularly in relation to key development issues such as rural poverty and rural transformation processes (Barret *et al.*, 2017; Meyfroidt, 2017). Evidence shows that having sufficient and equitable access to agricultural land is one of the determinants in achieving poverty reduction and food and nutrition security (Zezza *et al.*, 2011; De La O Campos *et al.*, 2018; FAO Smallholders Data Portrait, 2018). Furthermore, equitable agrarian structures support the capital accumulation needed for inclusive growth and structural transformation (Deininger and Squire, 1998; Easterly, 2007; Studwell, 2013), particularly at low levels of development and in the long term (Cipollina *et al.*, 2018). In this context, the distribution of land is a crucial dimension to assess the global state of land tenure and governance.

One valuable metric is the number of farms worldwide. This figure is continuously changing based on multiple drivers, including income, land availability, and demographic change (Mehrabi, 2023). According to the most recent and comprehensive estimates, based on data from 131 countries and territories, there are approximately 582 million agricultural holdings globally in 2025 (Lowder *et al.*, 2025). Taking into consideration the agricultural land area for all countries in the sample (2.9 billion ha), the average holding size is 5 ha, albeit marked by substantial regional divergences (Figure 6.1).

Densely populated Eastern and South-eastern Asia stands out with an average holding size of just 0.8 ha, closely followed by Southern Asia at 1.1 ha. Northern Africa and Western Asia report 1.7 ha, while sub-Saharan Africa averages 2.3 ha. In contrast, much larger average holdings are observed in Europe and Central Asia (18.9 ha), Latin America and the Caribbean (45.6 ha), and Northern America (200.2 ha). Oceania sits at the extreme end of the spectrum, with average holdings surpassing 1 756.5 ha, a figure largely driven by very large holdings in Australia and New Zealand (Lowder *et al.*, 2025).

In addition, Lowder *et al.* (2025) find that there are nearly 500 million agricultural holdings smaller than 2 ha, representing 85 percent of all units, and that these holdings account for only around 9 percent of total farmland (Figure 6.1). To put it another way, only 15 percent of the world's agricultural holdings are larger than 2 ha, but they represent 91 percent of the world's farmland. On the upper tail 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.

Figure 6.1. Distribution of holdings and farmland area by land size class



Note: This figure is based on the latest available census data from 131 countries since 2006, estimated to cover 98 percent of farms in the world. The total number of farms in the figure differs from the total number of farms projected for 2025 mentioned in the text, in accordance with the expected decline in the global number of farms.

Source: Authors' own elaboration based on Lowder, S., Aslihan, A., Cabrera-Cevallos, C.E., O'Neill, M., & de la O Campos, A.P. (2025). Farms, farm size, and farmland distribution: An update with most recent data and improved methodology. ESA Working Paper. Rome, FAO

These patterns point to a polarization in the distribution of land holdings. At one end of the spectrum, numerous smallholders operate on very small plots, highlighting fragmentation (Lowder, Davis, and Bhalla, 2025; Lowder *et al.*, 2025). At the other end, a significant proportion of land is concentrated in large operations, with this concentration most pronounced in higher-income countries and countries with large land endowments. This underscores the importance of analysing the distribution of holdings, rather than relying solely on average holding size, which can obscure significant disparities (Hendrickson *et al.*, 2017).

Land inequality and concentration

The changing patterns in land distribution underscore the importance of measuring land inequality and land concentration. Traditional measures that focus solely on differences in plot sizes or individual holdings, such as the Gini coefficient, provide only a partial picture (Bauluz, Govind, and Novokmet, 2020; Cabrera-Cevallos *et al.*, 2025). Key aspects of measuring land inequality should also account for the total quantity of land held (recognizing that individuals, households, or firms may control multiple plots – an important distinction from analyses conducted only at the farm level) as well as aspects related to the quality of the land, the tenure rights associated with it, and the specific populations of interest. These dimensions are framed by two central analytical questions: "Inequality of what?" and "Inequality among whom?" (Box 6.1).

Box 6.1

Inequality of what? And inequality among whom? A conceptual framework

The question "*Inequality of what?*" addresses the types of agricultural land[a] being measured, distinguished by rights to own, use, or manage the land and the metrics used to assess them, such as land area, land value, or both. Importantly, land value adds a critical dimension to land inequality analysis, as two households or holdings with the same land area may control assets of vastly different worth due to variations in:

- Soil quality (Benjamin, 1995);
- Agro-climatic zones (Azzarri and Signorelli, 2020);
- Agricultural production systems (Dixon *et al.*, 2001); and
- Access to infrastructure, such as irrigation, markets, and roads.

Recent evidence suggests that including land value in inequality assessments often reveals a more stark reality: larger landholders tend to own land of significantly higher value, thereby compounding inequality (Bauluz, Govind, and Novokmet, 2020).

a Agricultural land, defined based on its use, includes land under temporary and permanent crops, meadows, and pastures, as well as land under temporary fallow. It excludes land under holding buildings and farmyards, forest and other wooded land, land used for aquaculture, and other land not elsewhere classified (FAO, 2015).

The question of "*Inequality among whom?*" focuses on the populations of interest and is grounded in the concepts of vertical and horizontal inequality (Stewart, 2016).

Vertical inequality refers to disparities within a group, such as differences in land access or holdings among agricultural households or holding operators.

Horizontal inequality, by contrast, captures disparities between groups, where inequities arise not only from economic differences but also from social identity or status. This includes comparisons such as men versus women, landed versus landless populations, or Indigenous versus non-Indigenous Peoples, where belonging to a particular group may systematically affect access to land and land-related benefits.To capture these multiple dimensions of inequality, Cabrera-Cevallos *et al.* (2025) introduced a set of indicators designed to measure agricultural land inequality at the national level, with a view toward cross-country comparability[b]. These indicators address both vertical and horizontal inequalities and are structured to reflect differences in land quantity, value, tenure security, and access.

Table A. Definitions and sources of land Inequality Indicators[c]

Indicator	Type of land	Reference population	Data source	Description
Inequality in the distribution of agricultural land				
1	■ Land area operated	■ Agricultural holdings ■ (Household and non-household agricultural sector)	■ Agricultural censuses or national representative agricultural/farm structure surveys	■ Inequality in agricultural land area operated by agricultural holdings
2	■ Land area operated	■ Households operating farms	■ Living conditions household surveys with integrated agricultural modules	■ Inequality in agricultural land area operated by households
Inequality in the distribution of agricultural land rights				
3	■ Land area operated with documented ownership or alienation rights ■ Land area operated excluding land accessed through renting, leasing and sharecropping agreements	■ Agricultural holdings and/or households operating farms	■ Agricultural censuses, national representative agricultural/farm structure surveys, Living conditions household surveys with integrated agricultural modules	■ Inequality of agricultural land area under different tenure rights held by holdings or by households

b This system of indicators leverages the most widely available sources of information, depending on their availability for each country: 1) agricultural censuses, 2) nationally representative agricultural (holding structure) surveys, and 3) Living Conditions Surveys with agricultural integrated modules (such as the LSMS-ISA countries).

Indicator	Type of land	Reference population	Data source	Description
Inequality of agricultural land area standardized by land quality				
4	■ Land area standardized by land quality features	■ Agricultural holdings and/or households operating farms	■ Agricultural censuses, national representative agricultural/farm structure surveys, Living conditions household surveys with integrated agricultural modules	■ Inequality of agricultural land area standardized by land quality features operated agricultural holdings or by households
Inequality in distribution of agricultural land in the relevant population				
5	■ Land area operated	■ Farm households and "pure" landless households	■ Living conditions household surveys with integrated agricultural modules	■ Inequality of agricultural land area operated by the relevant population (including farming and landless households)

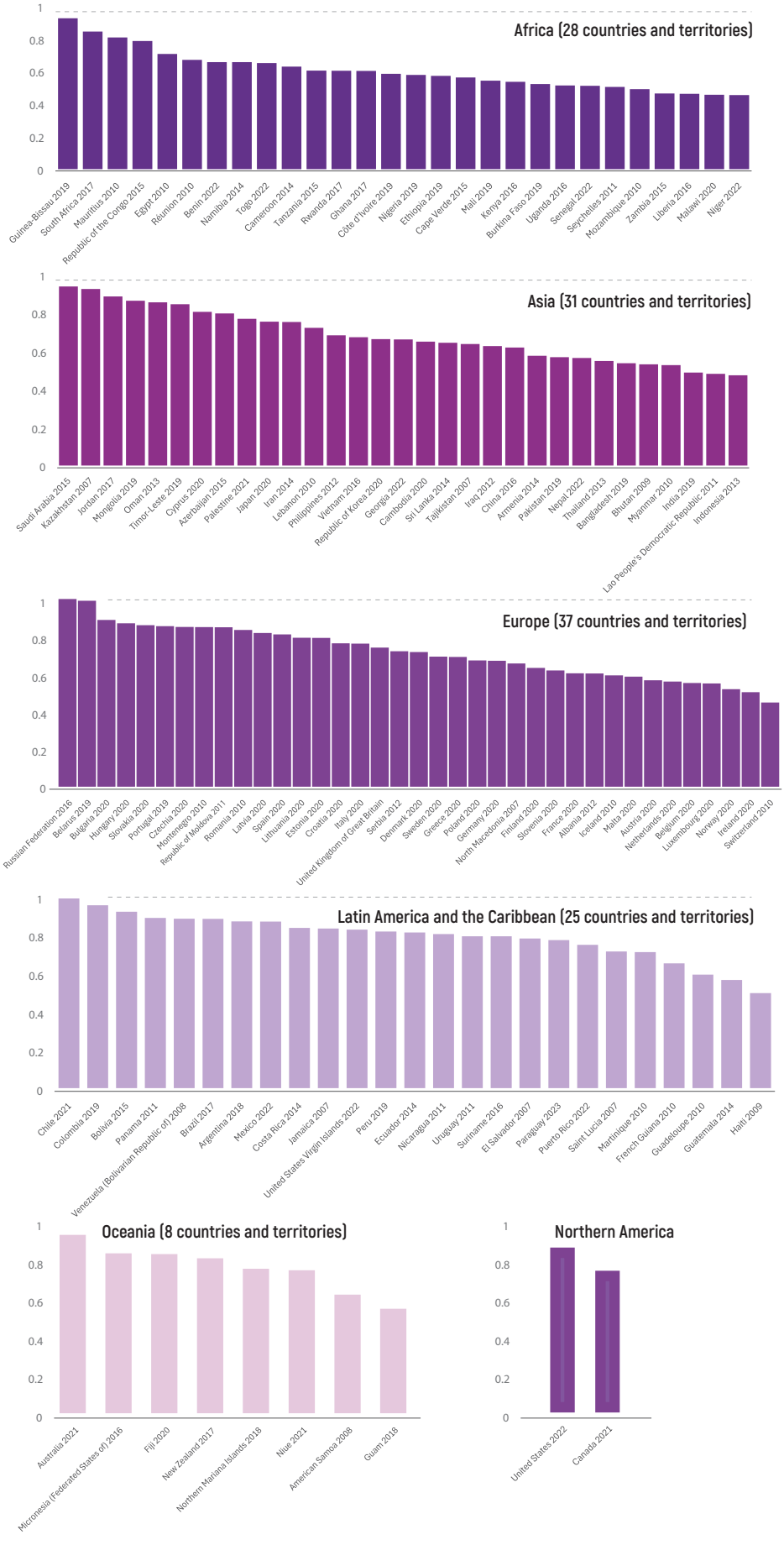
Note: Attention should be given to the design of the sampling frame for specific data sources. Not all censuses and agricultural surveys are representative of the entire agricultural sector (both household and non-household).

Source: Authors' own elaboration based on Cabrera-Cevallos, C.E., Admasu, Y., De La O Campos, A.P., De Simone, L., Pierri, F.M. & Moncada, L. 2025. Measuring agricultural land inequality: Conceptual and methodological issues. FAO Agricultural Development Economics Working Papers. ***https://doi.org/10.4060/cd4728en***

State of land inequality

Figure 6.2 presents regional and country-level trends in land inequality, comparing the earliest and most recent data points available. Distinct intra-regional patterns emerge. Latin American and European countries generally exhibit higher levels of agricultural land inequality, though temporal trends vary. In Latin America, land inequality has remained relatively stable in most countries. In contrast, Europe displays more heterogeneous trajectories, with some countries experiencing a decline in inequality and others an increase. African and Asian countries tend to have lower overall levels of land inequality, though several have seen a recent uptick in inequality. In Oceania, trends are mixed, with Australia standing out for having one of the highest levels of land inequality globally.

Figure 6.2. State of land inequality for selected countries and territories



Note: Each line shows the change in the Gini coefficient for agricultural land in a given country or territory, for 82 countries with at least two observations between the start of the 2000 WCA round (1996) and the present. Blue points indicate the earliest observation, red points the latest. The years of these observations are shown in brackets next to each country or territory.

Source: Authors' own elaboration based on Cabrera-Cevallos *et al.*, 2025.

Land inequality by distribution groups

Even though the trends in Gini coefficients indicate high land inequalities (Figure 6.2), the Gini measure itself is somewhat limited in its ability to demonstrate the extent of disparities in land distribution across the population of a country. For this reason, we revisit the same data for the same sample (composed of the 131 countries) to examine the distribution of agricultural land holdings between the bottom 40 percent and top 10 percent.

> ***On average, the top 10 percent of largest land holders operate around 56 percent of the land; in aggregate terms, however, this represents around 89 percent of the land.***

Conversely, the smallest 40 percent of land holders operate on an average of about 6 percent of the land, which is in aggregate just above 1 percent of the land. These land inequality patterns confirm earlier findings by Lowder *et al.* (2019) highlighting that the largest 1 percent of farms in the world operate more than 70 percent of the world's farmland.

As detailed in Box 6.2, this report presents two distinct kinds of indicators. One set is averages of country-level statistics, giving each country equal weight regardless of its size. Another set is aggregate indicators, which combine the underlying data across all countries in a region (or globally) and re-estimate the distribution for this combined population. In this case, the aggregate reflects the overall distribution of land across all holdings in the region or world. It is essentially a weighting exercise in which countries are weighted by the size of their landholding populations. This explains the difference between averages and aggregated measures, which arises because larger countries with highly unequal land distribution heavily influence the global aggregate, skewing it upward compared to the average across countries.

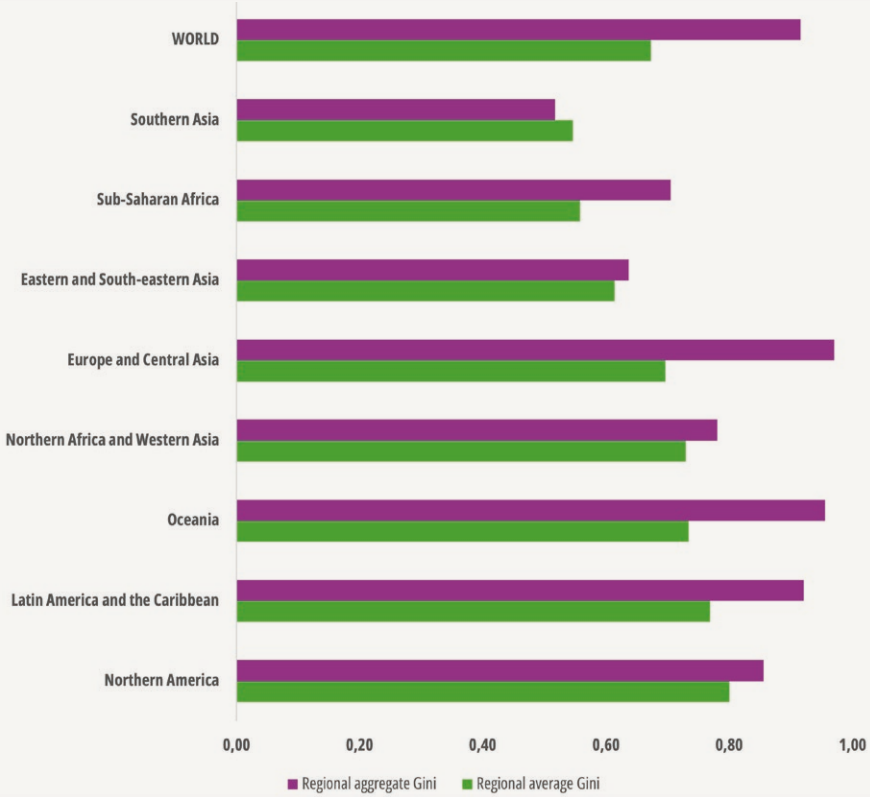
Box 6.2

Comparing different estimates of land inequality

Cabrera-Cevallos *et al.* (forthcoming), using the latest data point for each country available in the LINEQ database, estimate a global land Gini Coefficient of 0.95 for 2020, indicating far higher inequality than earlier estimates. This value is roughly 25 percentage points above the 0.63 global Gini reported by Bauluz, Govind, and Novokmet (2020) for 2015.

The difference stems primarily from methodology: Bauluz, Govind, and Novokmet (2020) calculated an unweighted average of national Gini coefficients, whereas Cabrera-Cevallos *et al.* (forthcoming) generate an aggregated regional and global Gini by reconstructing the full land distribution across countries. This approach captures both within-country and between-country disparities, providing a more comprehensive view of global land inequality. When the new dataset is analyzed using the earlier unweighted-average method, the global Gini is 0.67 (Figure A), consistent with the same order of magnitude as Bauluz, Govind, and Novokmet (2020). Together, these results highlight how previous approaches underestimated the true extent of land concentration worldwide

Figure A. Regional average and aggregates Gini coefficients for agricultural land holdings

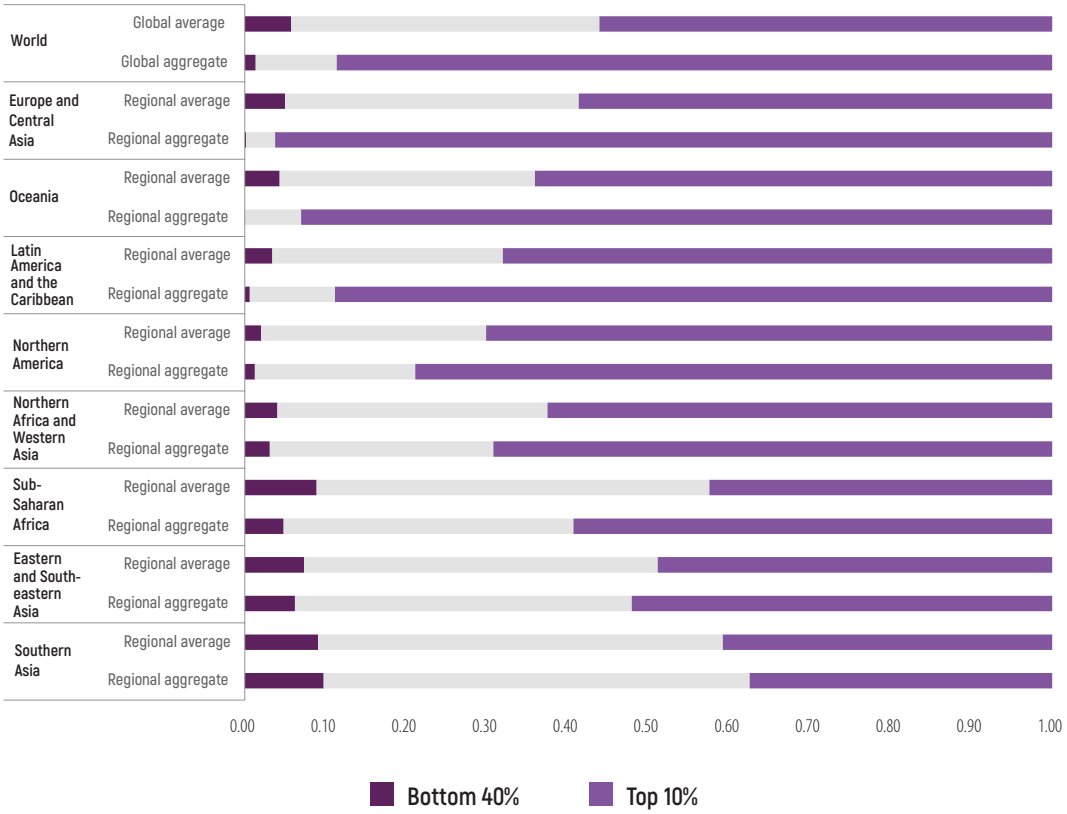


Note: The regional averages shown represent unweighted averages of national Gini coefficients from 131 countries, using the most recent census or nationally representative survey conducted after 2005. Regional aggregates are produced by combining raw census tabulations from LINEQ for all countries within each region, reconstructing the full regional land distribution through generalized Pareto interpolation. Inequality indicators are then recalculated for the entire region, based on the combined population of landholdings.

Source: Authors' own elaboration based on Lowder, S., Aslihan, A., Cabrera Cevallos, C.E., O'Neill, M., and de la O Campos, A.P. (2025).

Here too, regional differences are important (Figure 6.3). Northern 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 the land, respectively. When estimated and aggregated across countries, these figures represent 79 percent, 88 percent, and even 93 percent of the land. Europe and Central Asia illustrate a specific case. On average, the largest 10 percent of landholders in these countries operate 59 percent of the land, while the aggregated land they control accounts for 96 percent. At the other end of the spectrum are Southern and Eastern Asian countries and Africa. In accordance with its stable trend in land distribution, Southern Asia exhibits the most equal land distribution patterns, with the top 10 percent of landholders operating an average of 41 percent of the land, representing 37 percent of the land in aggregated estimations. The smallest 40 percent of landholders operate on an average of 9 percent of the land, which accounts for 10 percent of the aggregated land mass. Africa is similar, except for a few outliers, such as South Africa, which has highly concentrated land distribution patterns (Box 6.3).

Figure 6.3. Average and aggregate regional and global distribution of agricultural land



Note: Bottom 40/Top 10 percent comparisons: Contrasting the share of a resource held by the top 10 percent of the population to that held by the bottom 40 percent highlights disparities between the extremes. This measure is sensitive to changes at the distribution extremes and ensures cross-country comparability.

Source: Authors' own elaboration based on Cabrera-Cevallos, C., de la O Campos, A.P., O'Neill, M., de Simone, L., Fahad, M. (forthcoming).

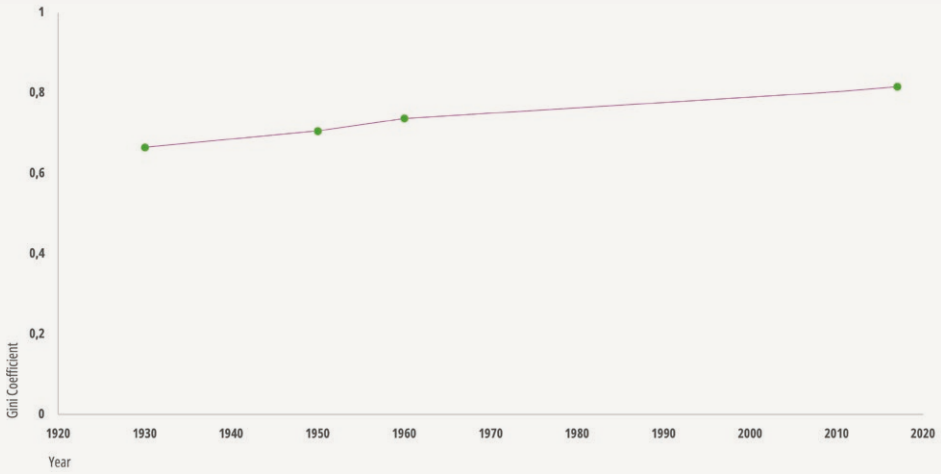
Box 6.3

Despite agrarian reforms, land remains highly concentrated in South Africa

South Africa continues to experience high levels of land concentration, rooted in the colonial and apartheid-era segregation of land and agricultural policies. These historical patterns have been further reinforced in the post-apartheid period by the liberalization of the agricultural sector and its integration into global markets, which have intensified concentration particularly regarding control over agricultural production (Lahiff, 2007; Cousins, 2015).

This trend is reflected in the evolution of South Africa's Land Gini Index (Figure A1). The initial increase is closely linked to segregationist policies such as the 1913 Natives Land Act, which prohibited Africans from purchasing or leasing land in 93 percent of the country, as well as subsequent legislation—including the 1923 Urban Areas Act, the 1936 Native Trust and Land Act, and the 1950 Group Areas Act—that systematically entrenched land dispossession. But even after 1990, and following the dismantling of apartheid in 1994, the Land Gini Index and overall land concentration continued to increase steadily, despite the repeal of discriminatory policies and the implementation of redistributive land reform measures. Regardless of the different land reform estimations (between 10 and 20 percent of the land was transferred through land reform and private sales (Presidential Advisory Panel on Land Reform and Agriculture, 2019; Sihlobo and Kirsten, 2021a, 2021b), the Land Gini Index suggests reform has not had significant impact on land distribution in South Africa.

Figure A1. The evolution of South Africa's land Gini Index (1925–2020)

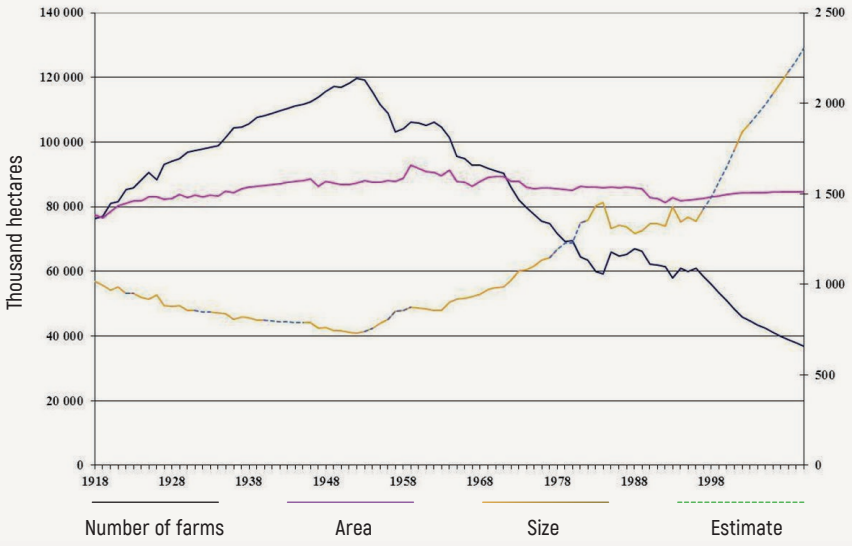


Source: Authors' own elaboration based on Lowder, S., Aslihan, A., Cabrera Cevallos, C.E., O'Neill, M., and de la O Campos, A.P. (2025).

In 1994, at the end of apartheid, South Africa had approximately 60 000 individual farming units (Stats SA, 1996). According to the 2017 Census of commercial agriculture, the number has declined to around 40 122 farming units (representing a decrease of 33 percent), of which 20 177 (50 percent) as individual/sole proprietor, 30 percent as companies and corporations, and 8.5% trusts, partnerships and co-operative societies (Stats SA, 2020). A 2017 governmental land audit noted that 6 percent of landowners owned 96 percent of all agricultural land (DRDLR, 2017).

Two possible reasons explain this trend. As highlighted by Mtero *et al.* (2023), one key explanation is that farms and land parcels part of the land reform program were predominantly redistributed or transferred to a few new large-scale farmers, while the majority of small and landless farmers continued to have only minimal access to land. The second is a clear trend of concentration and increasing capital intensiveness among farms. The decreasing number of farming units has coincided with increasing size (estimated around 2 300 ha on average, an increase of 50 percent since 1994). Farm employment has also almost halved from 349 017 to 177 258 between 2007 and 2017 (Stats SA, 2020) (Figure A2).

Figure A2. Evolution of farming units and area in South Africa (1918–2010)



Source (figure): Liebenberg, F. 2013. South African agricultural production, productivity and research performance in the 20th century. University of Pretoria. ***http://hdl.handle.net/2263/24416***

Source: Authors' own elaboration based on sources listed in the References section.

Land inequality appears even more severe when factors such as land rights, land quality, and landlessness are taken into account (Bauluz, Govind, and Novokmet, 2020; Cabrera-Cevallos *et al.*, 2025,). 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 the Republic of Guinea-Bissau, the top 10 percent of holdings control all documented land, while the bottom 40 percent hold none – a pattern also evident in Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, Senegal, and Togo (Table 6.1). 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 that suggested by total landholdings alone.

Table 6.1. Distribution of Land Operated: comparing total land operated with land with documentation or alienation rights

	Bottom 40%		Top 10%	
Region/Country	Land operated	Land operated excluding land without documentation or alienation rights	Land operated	Land operated excluding land without documentation or alienation rights
Africa				
Benin 2022	6.59*	0.00**	46.64	90.70
Burkina Faso 2019	13.71	0.00	33.66	84.44
Côte d'Ivoire 2019	11.40	0.00	34.47	66.70
Ethiopia 2019	9.02	8.69	34.32	34.78
Guinea-Bissau 2019	0.23	0.00	87.18	99.86
Malawi 2020	14.09	5.43	30.98	35.96
Mali 2019	10.26	0.00	34.64	100.00
Niger 2022	12.65	0.00	34.56	100.00
Nigeria 2019	7.13	3.93	40.80	45.15
Senegal 2022	11.58	0.00	31.68	86.51
United Republic of Tanzania 2015	6.95	3.96	48.09	51.75
Togo 2022	6.61	0.00	53.61	88.22
Uganda 2016	11.71	11.71	36.44	36.44

	Bottom 40%		Top 10%	
Region/Country	Land operated	Land operated excluding land without documentation or alienation rights	Land operated	Land operated excluding land without documentation or alienation rights
Asia				
Cambodia 2020	3.26	2.87	48.65	49.84
Myanmar 2015	11.02	9.52	36.02	39.25
Latin America				
Chile 2021	0.78	0.40	89.11	90.36
Ecuador 2014	1.97	0.86	70.57	86.82

Notes: (*) Questions on land documentation and rights were administered to different household populations across surveys. To ensure valid comparisons, land shares were calculated only for households that answered these questions, which explains the slight differences in land inequality values between Table 6.1 and Table 6.2 for the land-operator indicator. (**) Several countries report a 0.00 value, indicating that none of the land operated by the bottom 40 percent of holdings was documented. Figures refer to the latest available census or survey year. Corporate farm structures are excluded from both data sources and are not included in this analysis

Source: Authors' own elaboration based on Cabrera-Cevallos, C., de la O Campos, A.P., O'Neill, M., de Simone, L., Fahad, M. (forthcoming).

Further examination of the results within and across countries for the various land inequality indicators reveals several patterns (Table 6.2).

When land distribution is measured while excluding rented and sharecropped parcels from the sample, land inequality is more pronounced across all countries. The extent of inequality, however, is less pronounced than when considering documented or alienable land rights. The shift reveals a change in regional patterns: while Africa and Latin America showed the greatest disparities when rented and sharecropped parcels are excluded, several Asian countries now exhibit similar or greater inequality. Pakistan stands out, with the top 10 percent increasing its land share from 46.01 to 50.40 percent, while the bottom 40 percent drops from 7.69 to 4.84 percent. In Myanmar, the top 10 percent increases from 37.58 percent to 41.63 percent, and the bottom 40 percent decreases from 10.78 percent to 6.43 percent. These results suggest that rental and sharecropping arrangements do alleviate deeper inequalities in land access, particularly in parts of Asia.

Integrating land productivity as a proxy for land quality reveals land inequality in most countries, primarily through increases in the top 10 percent land share. This reveals more profound disparities when accounting for higher-quality land, showing that a few disproportionately hold the most productive areas.

The effect is most pronounced in areas where fertile land is scarce. In Nigeria, for instance, the top 10 percent land share rises from 40.93 to 50.71 percent, while the bottom 40 percent drops from 6.87 to just 0.38 percent. In Latin America, where land has long been highly concentrated, the top 10 percent share increases by only about 1 percentage point in Bolivia (Plurinational State of), Ecuador, and Peru.

The impact of including the landless population – rural households that do not own land, where at least one household member reports agricultural labour as their main occupational activity – on land inequality assessments varies by region. In most African countries, the effect is limited due to widespread on-farm activities: few households are completely landless. In contrast, the effect is more pronounced in Asia and Latin America, where including landless populations significantly amplifies inequality. The most notable changes occur in Pakistan, Myanmar, and Paraguay, where the share of the bottom 40 percent drops by 2–4 percentage points, matched by corresponding gains for the top 10 percent. These shifts highlight that excluding rural landless households may underestimate the true extent of land concentration, particularly in countries with large rural populations that lack access to land.

Table 6.2. Distribution of land operated: comparing total land with land i) excluding sharecropped and rented land; ii) weighted by land quality; and iii) including the pure landless population

	Bottom 40%				Top 10%			
Region/Country	Land operated	Land operated excluding sharecropped and rented land	Land operated std. by Crop PI Maize	Land operated including pure landless	Land operated	Land operated excluding sharecropped and rented land	Land operated std. by Crop PI Maize	Land operated including pure landless
Africa								
Benin 2022	5.83	4.29	5.93	5.52	48.34	49.63	49.18	48.70
Burkina Faso 2019	12.79	12.47		12.7	35.21	35.38		35.25
Côte d'Ivoire 2019	10.62	8.93		8.05	35.37	36.52		37.17
Ethiopia 2019	8.47	7.87	5.9	8.47	34.84	36.57	38.69	34.84
Guinea Bissau 2019	0.2	0.19		0.19	87.48	87.19		87.53
Malawi 2020	13.85	11.39	11.47	13.59	31.38	32.51	34	31.5
Mali 2019	9.55	9.15		9.32	35.15	35.42		35.32
Niger 2022	12.38	11.97	12.2	12.27	34.84	35.15	35.65	34.97
Nigeria 2019	6.87	2.25	0.38	6.84	40.93	47.21	50.71	40.93
Senegal 2022	10.7	10.11	10.23	9.27	32.42	32.73	32.83	33.32

	Bottom 40%				Top 10%			
Region/Country	Land operated	Land operated excluding sharecropped and rented land	Land operated std. by Crop PI Maize	Land operated including pure landless	Land operated	Land operated excluding sharecropped and rented land	Land operated std. by Crop PI Maize	Land operated including pure landless
United Republic of Tanzania 2015	6.92	2.87	2.73	6.63	48.19	53.29	56.18	48.42
Togo 2022	5.63	3.31	5.54	5.51	57.45	60.4	58.87	57.63
Uganda 2016	11.53	10.36	9.95	11.23	36.61	37.06	39.62	36.82
Asia								
Cambodia 2020	3.24	2.96		2.76	49.08	49.3		50.34
India 2019	8.98	8.97		8.26	40.89	40.89		41.47
Myanmar 2015	10.78	6.43		8.21	37.58	41.63		39.57
Nepal 2018	12.71	8.82		11.97	34.25	37.18		34.68
Pakistan 2020	7.69	4.84		5.05	46.01	50.4		48.3
Latin America								
Bolivia (Plurinational State of) 2015	1.74		1.51		80.96		82.34	
Chile 2021	0.79	0.55	0.78		89	89.89	88.95	
Colombia 2019	0.49	0.31	0.49		93.06	93.29	93.07	
Ecuador 2014	1.83	0.31	1.68	0.37	71.35	88.54	72.92	75.68
Guatemala 2014	8.27	3.18	8.21	1.74	42.79	48.49	42.82	50.22
Paraguay 2023	2.02	2.22	2.02	1.19	73.01	67	72.63	74.63
Peru 2019	2.63	1.21	2.33		71.17	74.7	72.19	

Note: Refers to the latest census/survey year available. Corporate farm structures are excluded from both these data instruments and thus not included in this analysis.

Source: Authors' own elaboration based on Cabrera-Cevallos, C., de la O Campos, A.P., O'Neill, M., de Simone, L., Fahad, M. (forthcoming).

The rise of commercial interests, investors and shareholding: New trends in land concentration

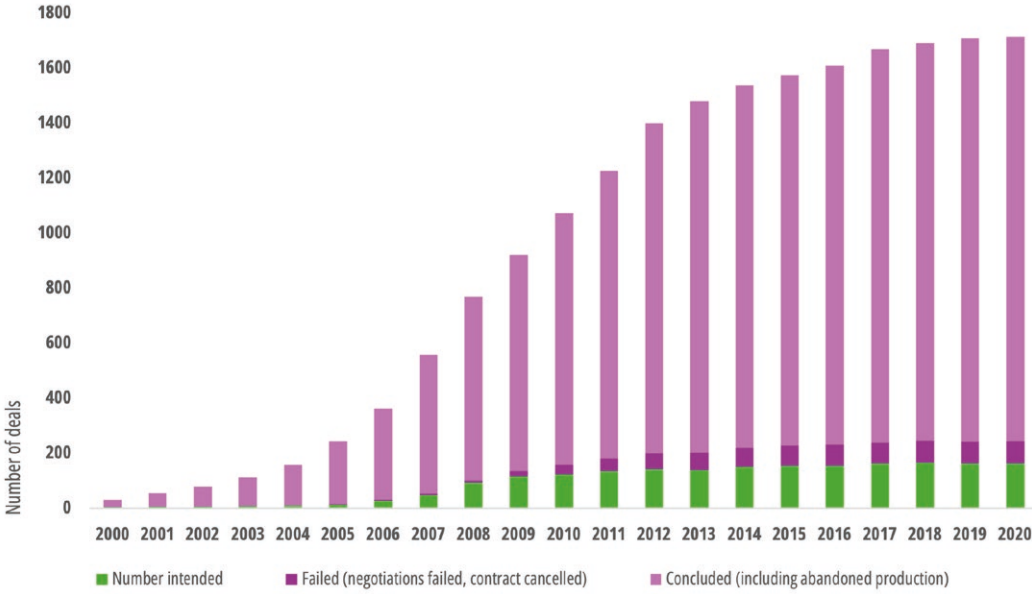
Land inequality, the uneven distribution of land ownership and control, stems from a complex interplay of historical, economic, political, and social factors (Anseeuw and Baldinelli, 2020; Wegerif and Guereña, 2020). It is often rooted in historical injustices such as colonialism and feudal systems, where land was concentrated in the hands of a few, and continues to be exacerbated by economic competition under the conditions imposed by monopolistic agrifood capital and by related policies and practices that favour large-scale industrial farming and corporate investments (Wegerif and Anseeuw, 2020; Clapp, 2023; Wolford *et al.*, 2024).

Whereas increasing farm size holds potential for sustainable agricultural intensification (Hartvigsen, 2022; FAO, 2025), especially in regions and countries currently reliant on smallholder systems and affected by significant land fragmentation (Nilsson, 2018; Asiama *et al.*, 2021), the benefits and potential unintended consequences of such land dynamics (such as land inequality) remain contentious and require further exploration (Ren *et al.*, 2024; Pierri, Anseeuw and Campolina, 2025).

Two specific and related trends are currently driving land concentration: the rise in large-scale land acquisitions by domestic and international investors, and the transformation of landholdings into increasingly financialized, shareholder-owned entities. Both reflect growing interest in (farm)land, particularly in the wake of the 2008–2009 food and financial crises (Anseeuw *et al.*, 2012; Cotula, 2013). Lands once considered of marginal investment interest in the early 2000s became highly sought after by investors and speculators. Since 2000, and 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 (Land Matrix, 2021). Africa alone accounts for 42 percent of these deals, totaling approximately 10 million ha (Figure 6.4).

These large-scale land acquisitions are exacerbating already polarized land distribution. The case of the United Republic of Tanzania illustrates the trend, where the 108 largest farms and recent land acquisitions now control more land than the smallest 2 million farmers (Wegerif and Guereña , 2020).

Figure 6.4. Cumulative number of deals globally in each negotiation status



Note: The number of concluded and failed deals is under-reported in this dynamic illustration (compared to the static 'current' number of deals per negotiation status) because deals for which information on the specific year relating to the negotiation status is lacking are excluded. Conversely, the number of intended deals is slightly over-represented because the few deals that have been concluded in an unknown year are included here as 'intended'.

Source: Land Matrix. 2021. Taking stock of the global land rush. Land Matrix Analytical Report. Land Matrix. *https://landmatrix.org/media/documents/Land_Matrix_2021_Analytical_Report_revised_22112021-FINAL_u0hBOi7.pdf*

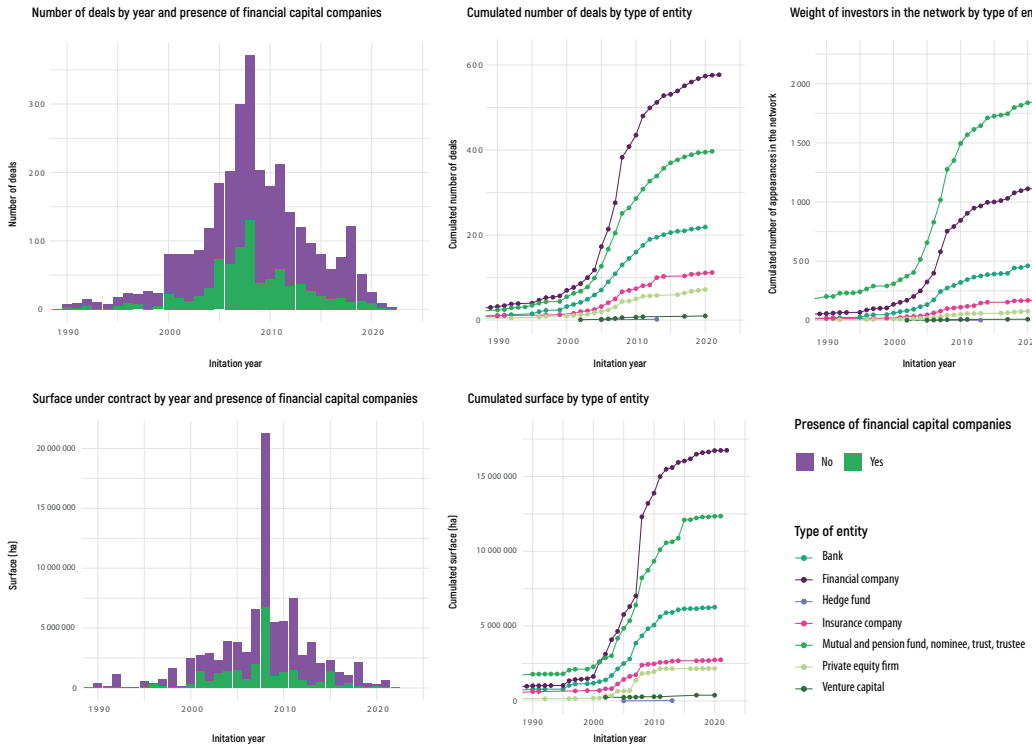
Although the number of large land deals related to agriculture and the food price crisis has slowed, commercial interest in land persists. Falling food prices since 2010, the widespread failure of large-scale land deals (Nolte, 2020), and growing civil and corporate scrutiny (Sändig, 2021) have curbed major international investments with large land footprints. Nonetheless, new type of acquisitions appear to be accelerating (Bourgoin *et al.*, 2024), increasingly driven by environmental concerns and climate change. As highlighted in Chapter 5, demand for land is rising for conservation, carbon storage, and sustainable management, prompting shifts in land use and property rights (Fairhead, Leach and Scoones, 2012; Blomley *et al.*, 2013; Dooley *et al.*, 2022; IPES-Food, 2024). While precise figures on land for biodiversity offsets remain unclear, the 2022 Land Gap Report (Dooley *et al.*, 2022) 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 and far exceeding the agricultural land rush described above.

These investments rely on new ways of valuing and commodifying land (Ouma, 2014; Ducastel and Anseeuw, 2018), involving a broader range of actors (McMichael, 2012; Wegerif and Anseeuw, 2020). Since 2000, large-scale land deals tracked by the Land Matrix have revealed three main investor types: traditional individual and family owners, corporate entities, and financial capital firms (Figure 6.5 and Figure 6.6).

Figure 6.5. Evolution of the main types of investors (2000–2025)

Source: Bourgoin, J., Interdonato, R., Gradeler, M. & Anseeuw, W. 2025. Pushing accountability boundaries for transnational land investments. The Journal of Peasant Studies, 0(0): 1–26. ***https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2025.2478423***

Figure 6.6. Evolution of investor types: number of deals, surface area, weight of investors in network by entities (1990-2020)

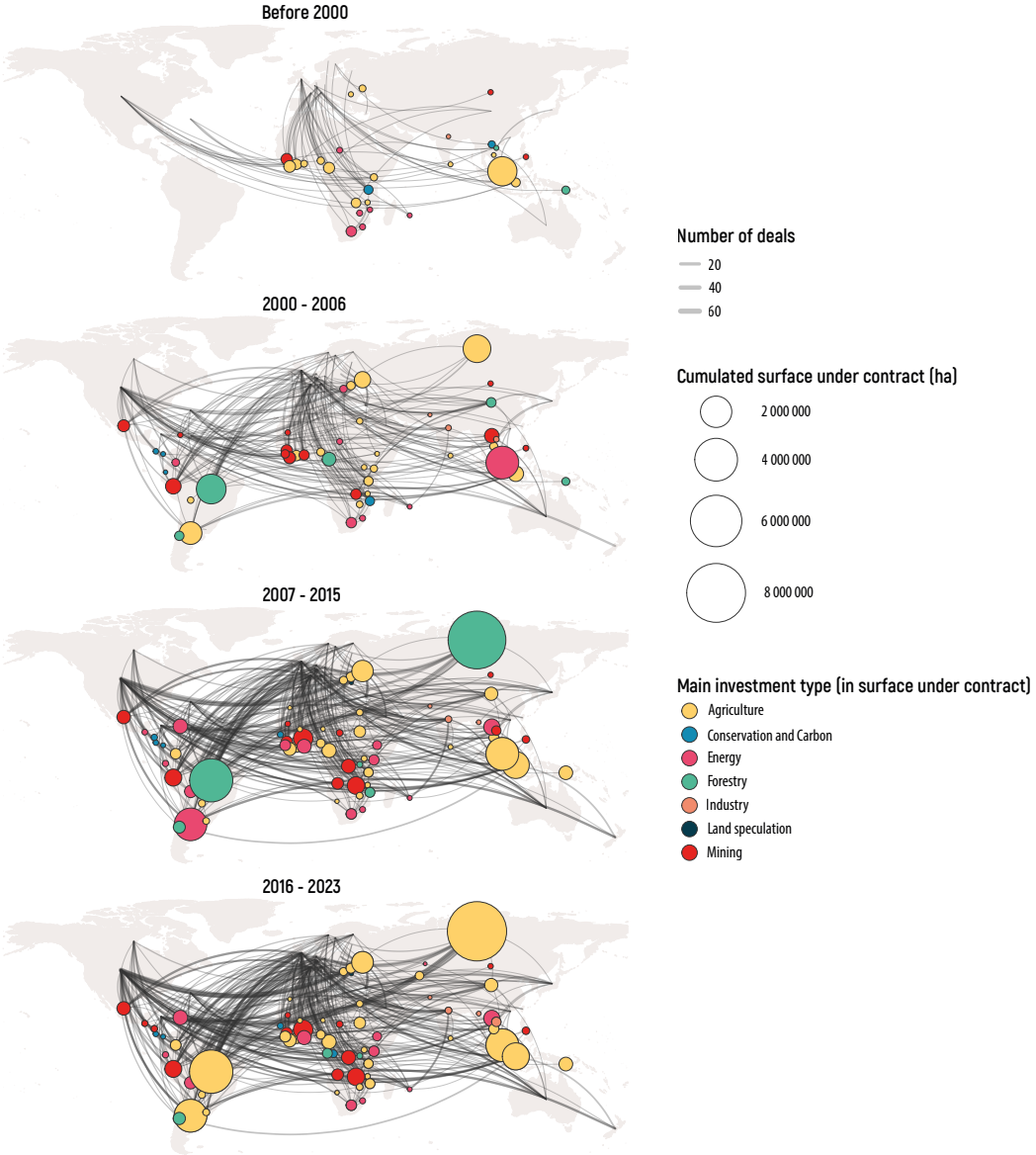


Source: Authors' own elaboration based on Land Matrix. 2025. Investors. ***https://landmatrix.org/list/investors/*** [Accessed on 26 February 2025]

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 (Figure 6.7). These companies presently account for about 70 percent of the transactions.

The most significant growth, both in the number of deals and the total area under contract, has been attributed to pension funds, constituting 51 percent of entities in this category (Bourgoin *et al.*, 2025). The relatively larger proportion of financial capital companies, when the cumulated land surface is considered, compared to the number of deals, highlights the increased size of these land acquisitions. Further analysis indicates that most actors involved in these investments (73 percent) function as shareholders.

Figure 6.7. Evolution of the financial capital companies' investment network



Refer to the disclaimer on page ii for the names and boundaries used in this map.

Note: At the time of the analysis, green investments were underrepresented in the Land Matrix data, resulting in a low representation of conservation and carbon here. A new data campaign by Land Matrix should strengthen the data on Green Investments and carbon deals (initiated in early 2025).

Source: Bourgoin, J., Interdonato, R., Gradeler, M. & Anseeuw, W. 2025. Pushing accountability boundaries for transnational land investments. The Journal of Peasant Studies, 0(0): 1–26. ***https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2025.2478423***

As land ownership evolves, holding sizes generally grow. Corporate structures and complex financial instruments (Oya, 2012; Le Billon and Sommerville, 2017; Sulle, 2017; Ouma, 2018) also drive increasing corporate concentration of ownership and control throughout the agrifood value chains and sector, which influences the use, benefits, and value of land (Anseeuw and Baldinelli, 2020). These changes extend beyond land concentration, reflecting a broader shift in the land and agricultural sectors commonly described as the corporatization or financialization of land and agriculture (Clapp, 2014; Fairbairn, 2020; Wegerif and Anseeuw, 2020; Ashwood *et al.*, 2022; Pritchard *et al.*, 2023).

Such changes of ownership and use become increasingly challenging to monitor and track, while simultaneously driving ongoing and intensified land concentration. This situation provides room for potentially unbridled land accumulation (Clapp, 2017; White et al., 2012; Anseeuw and Baldinelli, 2020).

These trends are global and evolve in various ways. In developing countries, they are a result of the above-described large-scale land acquisitions and investments. Nevertheless, in North America, Europe, and major economies, they appear to be fully integrated into rural economies. The case of France is illustrative, where corporate holdings are increasing and manage more than 67 percent of the national utilized agricultural area (UAA). Although initially introduced to support family transmission or usual development, some corporate holdings have progressively led to the circumvention of the traditional land control regulations and structures (such as the Safer, see Box 6.4) and facilitated land concentration. Until recently, before updated regulation was introduced through two successive laws in 2014 and 2021, these practices were unaccounted for, and the extent of these trends was undocumented (Box 6.4). This is the case in most, if not all, other countries affected by these trends, making it again difficult to assess the real extent of land concentration globally.

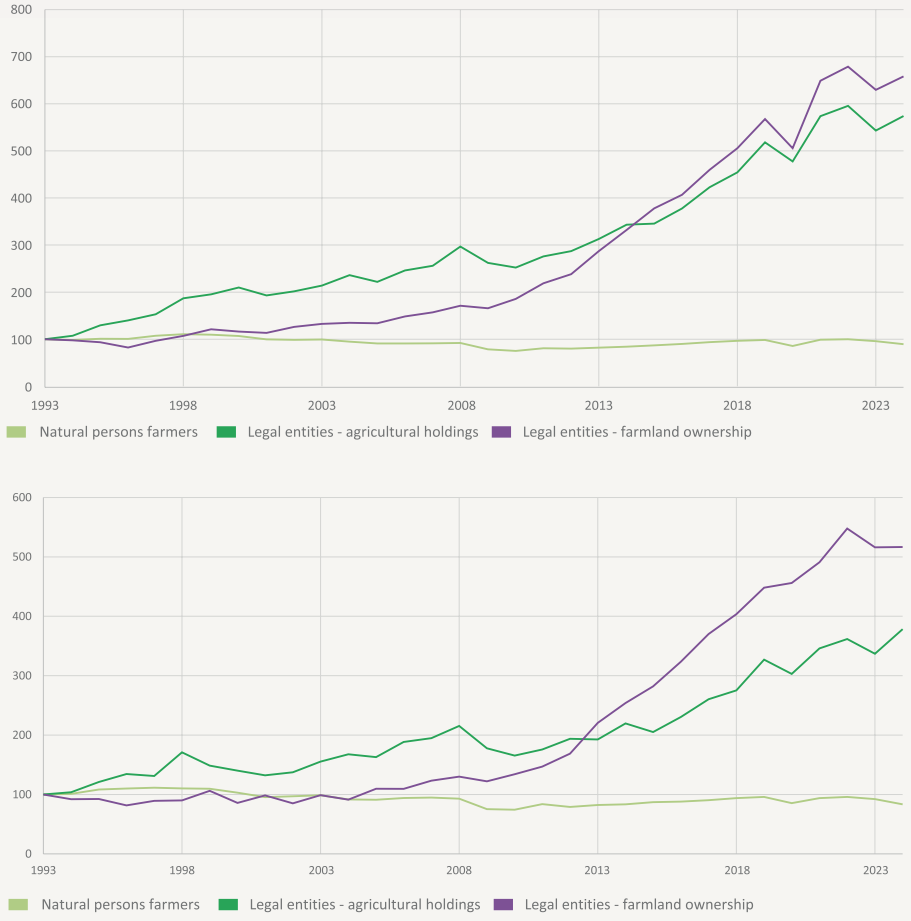
Box 6.4

Corporate control of land in France

In France, the management of agricultural land (owned and rented) has been regulated since 1960. The regulations aim to control land prices, establish minimum surface area requirements for profitable holdings, ensure the balanced development of all holdings, and limit the excessive concentration of land. However, access to land through control of share capital or equity has been increasing for several years, in direct relation to the growing number of corporate holdings.

The growing number of corporate holdings leads to the increase of their acquisitions of farmland

Figure A. Evolution of acquisitions on the agricultural land market (by type of buyers, number and area) (1993–2023)



By area: *Basis* 1993 = 100
Source: Safer database. 2025. Jegouzo, L. Unpublished ***https://www.safer.fr/*** [Cited 15 May 2025].

This growth has led to a steady increase in farmland acquisitions or control by such entities. Between 1970 and 2020, the total number of French agricultural holdings decreased from nearly 1.6 million to just under 400 000. This general decrease masks two opposing trends: the progressive decline of individual holdings and the rise of corporate holdings. As a result, 2020 figures show that while still a minority (42 percent), corporate holdings manage more than 67 percent of the national utilized agricultural area (UAA). In contrast, individual holdings account for 58 percent but manage only 33 percent of the UAA (Safer, 2022) (Figure A).

The development of corporate holdings, which own or rent agricultural real estate, stems from the advantages granted by their status compared to individual holdings. These advantages include labour sharing, progressive transfer of capital to a successor, access to external funding, and favourable taxation.

With their increasing presence in the French agricultural landscape, they have taken a growing share of the land market. Between 1993 and 2024, they increased their acquisitions 5.7 times for operating companies and 6.6 times for landholding companies. In 2024, they represented 18 percent of acquisitions, covering 27 percent of the area and 43 percent of the value. In the meantime, acquisitions made by individual farmers remained stable or even decreased slightly.

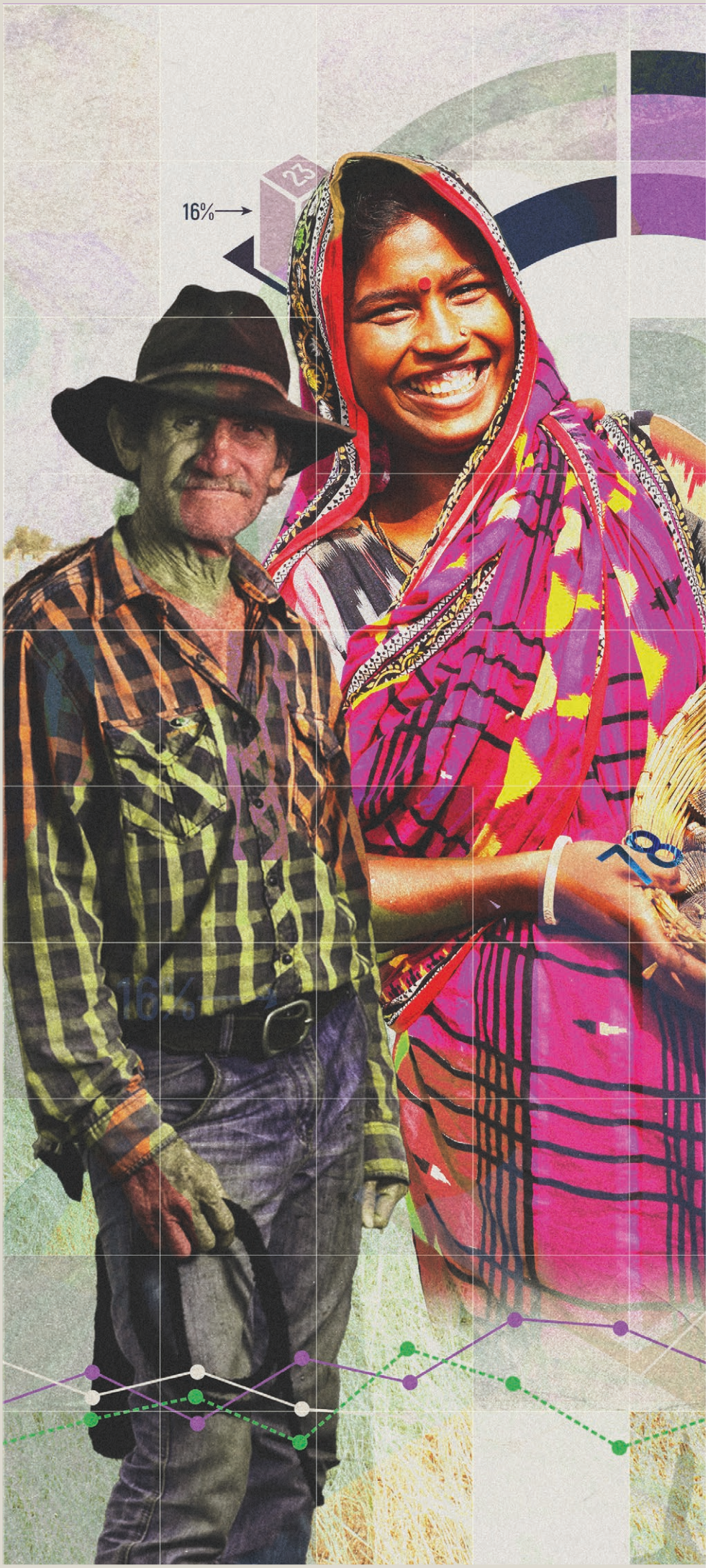
Concentration of land facilitated in the absence of regulation of the corporate market

Once acquired by these companies, the land is rarely resold on the land market as a real estate asset. Instead, it is more commonly transferred on the corporate market in the form of shares or stock, as part of the company's overall capital. These operations reflect the very purpose of corporate forms, which allow for the progressive transfer of capital or shared land burden while benefiting from more favourable taxation. Nevertheless, certain operations are conducted expressly to create complex corporate structures and concentrate farmland.

In light of the evolution of land ownership and control through corporate operations, the regulation introduced in 1960, designed for individual holdings where the land was mostly owned directly by operators or landlords, became partially ineffective. Corporate holdings have led to the circumvention of the powers of structural control.

In response to the challenges posed by this new mode of access, updated regulation was introduced through two successive laws in 2014 and 2021. The reforms provided a clear view of the market and allowed regulation of corporate operations, with objectives aligned with the spirit of the 1960 law: establishing farms and combating excessive enlargements. In 2024, the traditional farmland market represented 447 200 ha while corporate market accounted for 955 000 ha.

Source: Authors' own elaboration based on Safer. 2022. Le marché des parts sociales. Paris. ***https://www.safer.fr/app/uploads/2023/06/2023-PDT2022-2-PS.pdf***



After two decades of reinforced international guidance on responsible land and tenure governance, it is necessary to ask what progress has been made in land policy formulation and its implementation.

Chapter 7

PROGRESS, PRESSURES, AND PUSHBACK IN LAND AND TENURE SECURITY

7

The first section of this chapter reviews how countries have engaged with that guidance and examines how key tenure rights and governance principles have been incorporated into national frameworks. It recognizes that adopting international standards does not always mean actual compliance or change on the ground, and that some countries without formal adoption may already have aligned policies in place. The second section of this chapter recontextualizes these policy-related assessments with the broader results presented in this report. It will feed the conclusions of this report, reflecting on pathways forward for land tenure and responsible land governance.

Progress, mainly at policy level

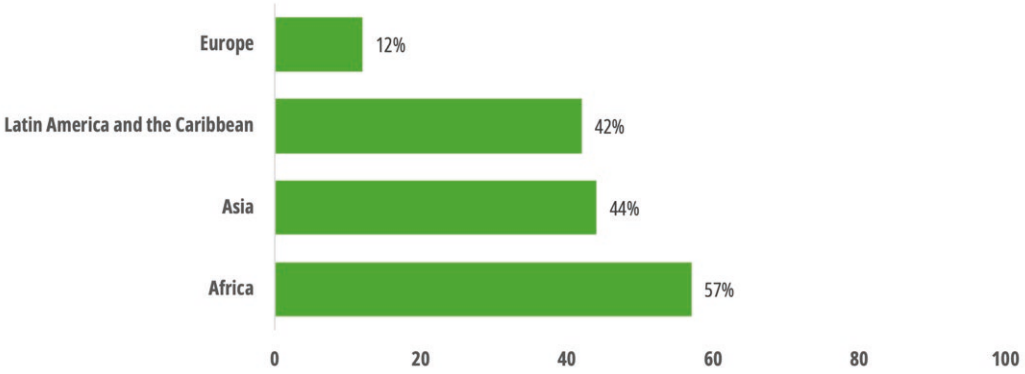
From global and regional frameworks to national land reform

Over the past two decades, the increasing recognition of the importance and challenges of land governance has led to the development of several international guidance frameworks. Key milestones include the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP, 2007), which introduced the principle of Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC); the African Union's Framework and Guidelines on Land Policy in Africa (2009); the Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries, and Forests (VGGT, 2012); and the Principles for Responsible Investment in Agriculture and Food Systems (RAI, 2016), adopted by the UN Committee on World Food Security (CFS). Other milestones are the ASEAN Guidelines for Responsible Investment in Food, Agriculture, and Forestry (2018) and the UN Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas (UNDROP, 2018).

An assessment for this report found that, since the VGGT's endorsement in 2012, 71 countries (36 percent globally) have engaged in some form of land reform. In Africa, this was the case for 31 countries, nearly 60 percent of the continent (Figure 7.1). New land laws and policies were introduced in Chad, Mali, and Liberia, while principles of responsible land governance were incorporated into reforms in Uganda, Kenya, Sudan, and Niger (and beyond Africa, also in Viet Nam) (FAO 2021). Some countries made smaller changes, such as Ethiopia's land valuation guidelines for investments (FAO 2019b) or Senegal's local land charters (FAO 2021c). Reform activity peaked around 2015–16, a few years after governance frameworks such as the F&G and the VGGT were launched (Figure 7.1).

As noted in Chapter 1 (Figure 1.3), land governance considerations are increasingly being integrated into policies across various sectors. The sectors include climate, but also gender equality, food security, Indigenous Peoples' rights, peacebuilding, labour, migration, and youth.

Figure 7.1. Proportion of countries per region with land policy reforms



Source: Authors' own elaboration.

The uptake of international land guidance

The voluntary nature of the VGGT and similar guidance means their uptake relies on political will and resources (Larbi, 2018). In some cases, they have been clearly integrated into national frameworks: for instance, Sierra Leone used the VGGT as a basis for its 2015 Land Policy and its 2022 Customary Land and Land Commission Acts (Wegerif *et al.*, 2025). Yet, broader efforts to encourage adoption have seen mixed results (Myers and Sanjak, 2022), and a lack of systematic monitoring makes impact hard to measure. Still, it is possible to assess how many countries undertook land policy or legal reforms since the VGGT's approval and to identify where they were influential.

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.***

Key regional trends can be summarized as follows:

- Thirty-one ***African*** countries have engaged in substantial reforms since the endorsement of the VGGT. In 13 of these, the VGGT were influential: from policy dialogue in decentralized preparatory workshops (Benin, Cameroon, Madagascar, Malawi) to awareness-raising and technical backstopping (Mozambique, South Sudan, Uganda, United Republic of Tanzania), and to outright VGGT-based multi-stakeholder dialogue and formulation (Chad, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Sierra Leone) (Box 7.1). Additionally, in other countries, although key legislative reforms were implemented without interaction with the VGGT, they demonstrate substantive alignment (Burkina Faso) or moderate alignment with the VGGT and F&G principles (Gabon and Ghana).
- For ***Asia***, 21 countries have undergone land policy/legal reforms since the approval of the VGGT. Of these, the Lao People's Democratic Republic, Mongolia, Myanmar, Nepal, Kyrgyzstan, and Viet Nam have utilized the VGGT in their formulation processes. In the Lao People's Democratic Republic, for example, the FAO and the VGGT played a crucial role in supporting the Government in drafting the 2019 amendment to the Land Law. They also assisted in preparing relevant subsidiary legislation on land business regulation.
- In ***Europe***, five countries have promoted land policy/legal reforms since the approval of the VGGT. Three of them (Albania, the Republic of Moldova, and North Macedonia) have utilized the VGGT in their formulation processes.
- In ***Latin America and the Caribbean***, extensive policy/legal formulation has occurred in 14 countries since 2012. The VGGT has been used as a reference in at least five. FAO and other partners have provided technical backstopping to numerous governments in this effort. In Colombia, the VGGT was used to promote a multi-stakeholder platform that supports the Peace Accord and the ensuing land reform process. In Guatemala, the *Politica Agraria* (agrarian policy) 2013–2020, approved by the Government in 2014, made explicit mention of the VGGT as a key reference for the policy, developed through a wide multi-stakeholder consultation exercise. In Grenada, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, and Saint Lucia, the Governments have piloted the establishment of National Land Banks in line with VGGT guidance.

Box 7.1

Niger – an example of an inclusive land policy reform inspired by the VGGT and F&G

In February 2018, the Government of Niger organized the *États généraux du foncier* (General Land Assembly), a high-level forum attended by more than 300 stakeholders. It aimed to assess the country's land tenure situation and identify opportunities for improvement.

Among the main outcomes was the recommendation to prepare a land policy based on the VGGT and the Framework and Guidelines for Land Policy (F&G) in Africa. A multistakeholder committee was established, comprising government ministries, academia, traditional leaders, notaries, the private sector, civil society, and technical and financial partners.

The preparation of both the *États généraux* and the land policy was an inclusive process based on VGGT-inspired training programs prepared by the national stakeholders with FAO support. For instance, these trainings made women more aware of and confident in speaking about their rights. As a result, women's organizations became members of the multistakeholder committee and started playing an active role in the tenure debate. The rural land policy of Niger was adopted in 2019, and FAO, GIZ, and other development partners support its implementation.

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

The uptake of key responsible land governance principles in land policy reform

Engaging in land reform needs to be further unpacked (Box 7.2), particularly regarding effective uptake of principles for responsible land governance. Globally, although the broader responsible land governance frameworks have been prominently adopted at national policy level, the uptake of specific principles for responsible land governance remains limited. An assessment of land policies and laws in 172 countries shows that the uptake of all assessed principles remains between 20 to 30 percent of countries (Figure 7.2).

Box 7.2

Assessment of uptake of key VGGT principles in land policy reform

To document the uptake of principles of responsible land governance, 206 land policies and laws from 172 countries worldwide were assessed. The analysis is not limited to a specific period, extending backward to identify the most recent legislation on land tenure and reforms, with 75 percent of the assessed documents dating from 2000 or later. Each document was assessed along the following VGGT/F&G principles, representing core principles of responsible land governance:

- Protection of legitimate tenure rights
- Consultation
- Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC)
- Access to legal support and the existence of dispute resolution mechanisms
- Provision for human rights
- Customary land rights
- Gender
- Responsible investment
- Transparency and accountability
- Expropriation and compensation

Based on the degree of incorporation of the above principles, each document was scored 1–3:

- ***0*** = no mention or uptake,
- ***1*** = marginally incorporated (just mentioned in the text),
- ***2*** = significantly incorporated (developed in the text),
- ***3*** = yes, fully incorporated (fully developed through several articles, linked to implementation frameworks, leading to related legislation, etc.).

For each principle, global scores were calculated based on this assessment, providing a snapshot of the results.

Source: Authors' own elaboration.

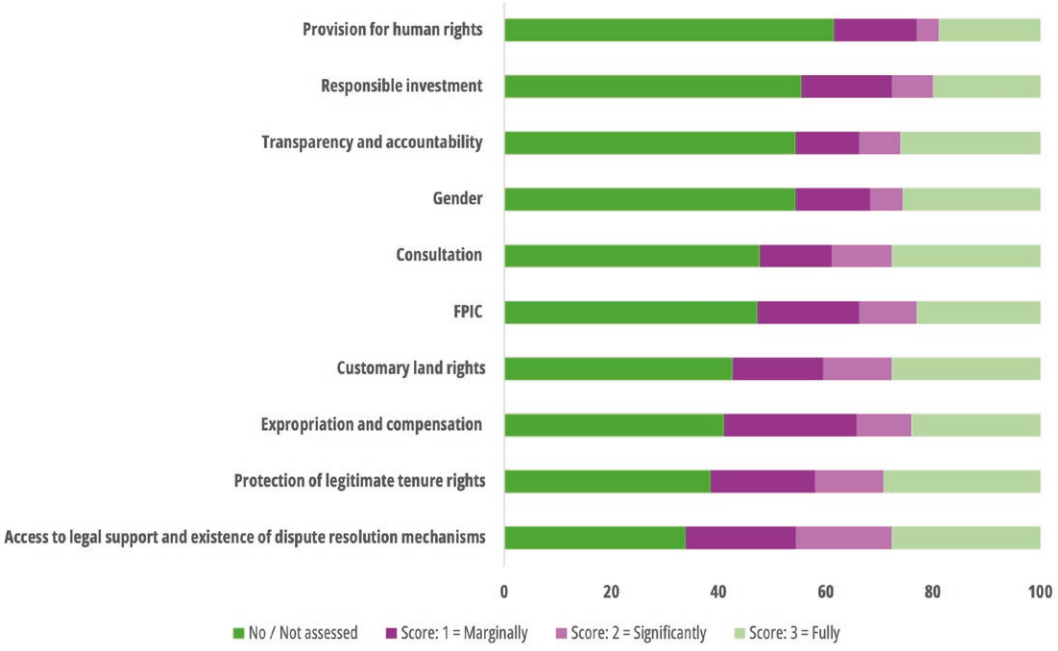
Provision for human rights principles with regard to land remains low, with only 20 percent of the 172 countries assessed fully taking them up.

On the other hand, more than 60 percent of the countries do not refer to human rights principles in their land policy.

Furthermore, in these countries, other principles such as responsible investment, transparency and accountability, gender, consultation, and FPIC also rank particularly low in uptake.

Principles recognizing customary land rights, expropriation and compensation, protection of legitimate tenure rights, and access to legal support show a rather nuanced degree of uptake. Although relatively few countries (between 30 and 40 percent) do not take them up at all, several partially adopt these principles (Figure 7.2).

Figure 7.2. Uptake of VGGT principles in national policy



Source: Authors' own elaboration.

Progress lagging behind in practice

In alignment with the degree of uptake, effective impact on the ground also often remains limited, mainly due to a lack of implementation, non-compliance, and avoidance.

Lack of implementation and enforcement

Land policy implementation often receives less attention than other areas due to its complexity, slow and long-term impact, and competing national priorities. Despite its importance for sustainable development, environmental protection, and economic growth (see Chapter 1), the implementation of land policy is frequently underfunded and hindered by bureaucratic inefficiencies or resistance from powerful actors (Claassens *et al.*, 2009; Akram-Lodhi and Kay, 2009). The case of women's land rights is demonstrative of this. As shown in Chapter 4, improvements in legal frameworks for women's land rights (SDG 5.a.2) do not necessarily translate into gains in practice (SDG 5.a.1), 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 hinders efforts to assess whether policies and international guidelines are being effectively applied (Duffield and Christian, 2024). Long-term data on land administration or perceptions of tenure security are rare, with Prindex (2020, 2024) and limited SDG reporting offering exceptions.

The poor reporting on land-related SDG indicators (see Chapter 2) underscores the problem. Few countries consistently report progress on land rights, and only Rwanda and Zambia mentioned land rights progress in the 37 Voluntary National Reviews submitted in 2023 (SDG Land Momentum Group, 2024).

Non-compliance in practice

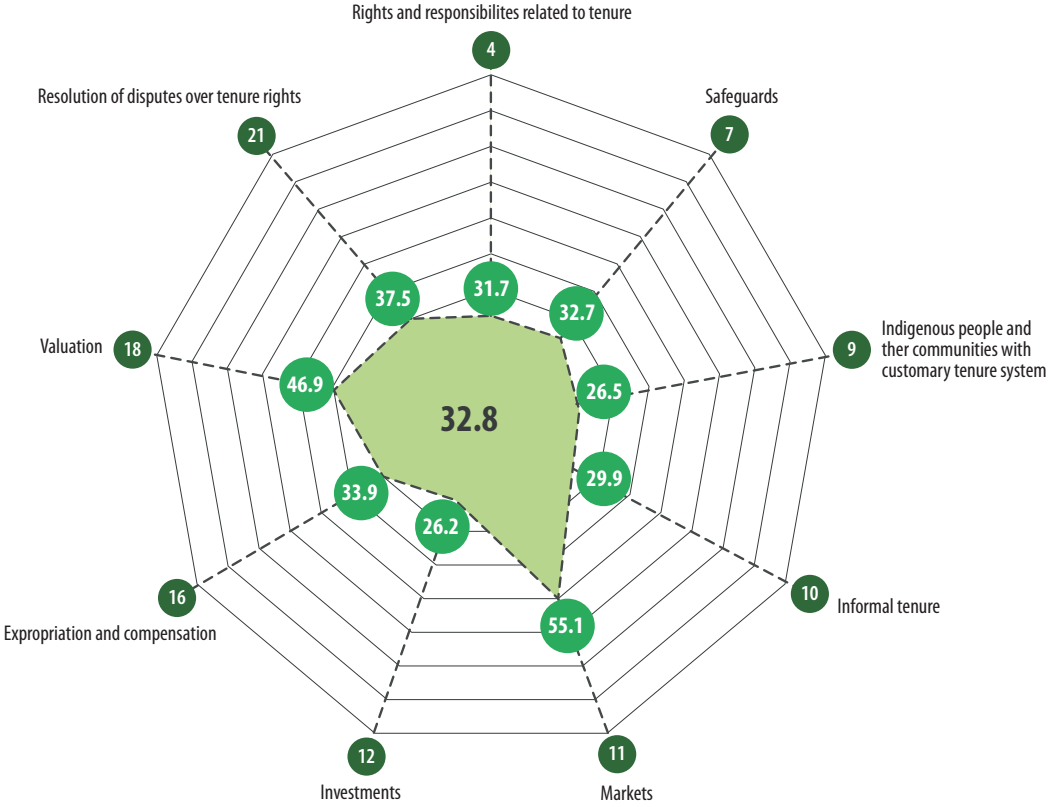
Non-compliance with land rights, or land disputes, is a common issue worldwide, particularly in developing countries and areas with complex or contested land tenure systems. This is particularly evident in land investment patterns. A recent Land Matrix Initiative assessment of large-scale land acquisitions (LSLAs) in Africa found low compliance with the VGGT, despite policy progress over the past decade (Land Matrix, 2022).

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 (see Figure 7.3).***

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 (Figure 7.3).

Figure 7.3. Compliance of LSLA as assessed by the Land Matrix against the VGGT principles in Africa



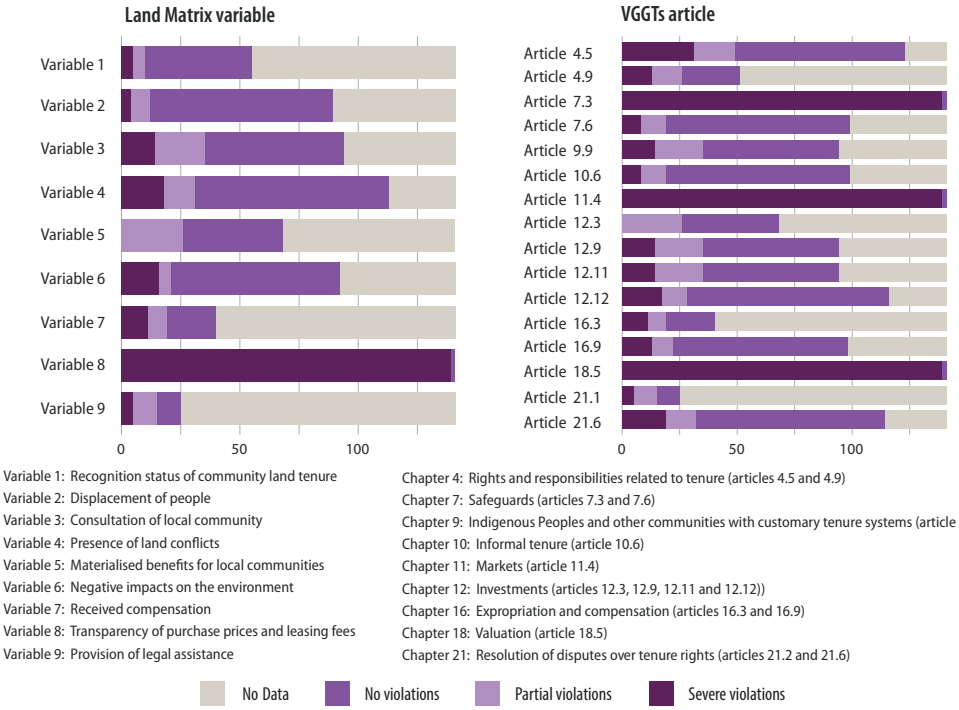
Source: Land Matrix. 2022. Little progress in Practice: Assessing transparency, inclusiveness and sustainability in large-scale land acquisitions in Africa. Pretoria, University of Pretoria. *https://landmatrix.org/media/documents/LMI_Africa_Report_on_investor_practices_2022_dx1ccDU.pdf*

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 provide effective legal or administrative recourse are often weak.

A key challenge is the persistent lack of transparency in land governance, particularly concerning LSLAs. While there has been some progress (e.g., more accessible information in countries like Liberia and Sierra Leone, or sector-specific initiatives like OpenLandContracts and the Land Matrix), most LSLA data remain incomplete or unavailable. According to Land Matrix (2022), only a handful of countries provide substantial information. Liberia, the best performer, covers 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.

Similar issues arise with carbon offset projects. Despite scarce data, a 2025 Land Matrix study found that one in four such deals violates core VGGT principles.Common issues include a lack of transparency on financial terms, absence of proper community consultation or FPIC (in 25 percent of cases), unresolved land conflicts (22 percent), and environmental harm (22 percent). These findings highlight that, without better transparency, adherence to VGGT principles will remain partial at best (Figure 7.4).

Figure 7.4. Score distribution at the global level in number of deals by LMI variable and VGGT article



Source: Land Matrix, 2025. ***https://landmatrix.org/*** [Accessed on 18 January 2025].

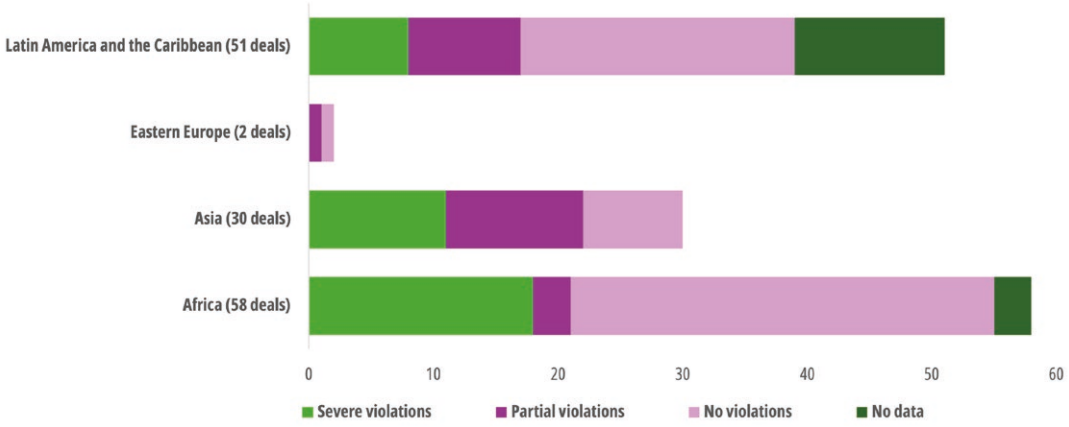
At the regional level, the deals listed in Asia show the highest level of non-compliance, with 74 percent having partial or severe violations, averaging three violations per deal (Figure 7.5). Deals in Africa and Latin America and the Caribbean, on the other hand, recorded significantly lower levels of partial or severe violations, at 36 percent and 34 percent, respectively.

While only two deals were scored for Eastern Europe (since carbon credits and related programmes are just beginning to be implemented across the region), these deals appear to have fewer violations compared to the average results in other regions.

This analysis reveals widespread violations of the principles of responsible land tenure in carbon-offsetting deals on the Land Matrix Initiative platform, especially regarding transparency, community consultation, and conflict resolution. It highlights the urgent need to strengthen oversight and compliance in these land investments, particularly where violations are frequent and severe.

The findings also expose major gaps in equity and community well-being, emphasizing the need for better data access, strict adherence to FPIC, and stronger safeguards. Addressing these issues is crucial to ensure responsible land governance and fair outcomes for Indigenous Peoples, and other customary communities (Bourgoin *et al.*, 2025), particularly as climate and carbon projects rapidly expand (IPES-Food, 2024).

Figure 7.5. Number of deals by region and score



Note: The score in the figures excludes variable 9 (provision of legal existence) as seen in Figure 7.4
Source: Land Matrix, 2025. ***https://landmatrix.org/*** [Accessed on 18 January 2025].

Efforts are being made to increase compliance with internationally adopted standards, particularly in the areas of land and land rights. On 25 July 2024, the EU's Directive 2024/1760 on Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence came into force. It aims to ensure that companies identify and address negative human rights and environmental impacts throughout their operations and global value chains. The Directive builds on commitments from instruments such as the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, the OECD Guidelines, and the CFS Principles for Responsible Investment in Agriculture and Food Systems. While the Directive marks a step forward for responsible land governance, translating it into real changes on the ground will take time. This delay reflects the complexity of implementation and resistance from some countries, as well as influential lobbying groups (European Parliament, 2025).

The challenges of strengthening compliance are further compounded by evolving practices and actors in the land sector. While current systems can track land markets and ownership or rental patterns, they are ineffective in monitoring shareholding structures and other financial mechanisms used to control land, as described in Chapter 6. These structures are rarely disclosed, making them essentially invisible in most countries. This lack of transparency not only hinders efforts to understand their scope and impact but also significantly complicates, if not obstructs, the enforcement of compliance measures. The case of France is illustrative of this (Box 7.3).

Box 7.3

France and the Law 'Sempastous': emergency measures to document and regulate access to agricultural land through corporate structures

The *Société d'Aménagement Foncier et d'Établissement Rural* (Safer) is a French land development and rural establishment agency, established in 1960 to regulate the rural land market to ensure balanced and sustainable development. That year, the *Loi d'Orientation Agricole* (Agricultural Guidance Law) was introduced, bringing transparency and control to the rural real estate market. It required French notaries to inform Safer of all proposed sales of rural real estate. The law not only enabled Safer to exercise their right of pre-emption but also to establish an observatory of the French land market.

Faced with the development of land control via corporate transactions, the regulations introduced in France in 1960 were designed for individual holdings where the majority of land was held directly by the farmers or by owner-lessors. These regulations became ineffective. Based on a similar principle, in 2014, the French Law on the Future of Agriculture* required sellers to inform Safer of all proposed sales of shares in agricultural companies. This information enables Safer to exercise their right of pre-emption – only on sales of 100 percent of shares – and to launch a new section of their agricultural land observatory. The data collected since 2016, coupled with that from specific studies, have enabled France to gain a better understanding of the shareholding and corporate market and improve the regulations in place (SAFER, 2022).

In 2021, a new law** extended transparency to all corporate transactions (sales of shares, but also all forms of equity investment). It also applied to a wider spectrum of companies, provided they either owned or operated real estate for agricultural use or purpose, both directly and indirectly via holdings in other companies.

Notes: (*) Law no. 2014-1170 of 13 October 2014 on the future of agriculture, food, and forestry.
(**) Law no. 2021-1756 of 23 December, 2021, on emergency measures to regulate access to agricultural land through corporate structures

Sources: Authors' own elaboration based on SAFER. 2022. Le marché des parts sociales. Paris. ***https://www.safer.fr/app/uploads/2023/06/2023-PDT2022-2-PS.pdf***

Furthermore, as shown in Chapter 6, many corporate entities – including those involved in large-scale land acquisitions – are increasingly structured as shareholding companies and often registered offshore, frequently in tax havens (Borras Jr *et al.*, 2014; Bourgoin *et al.*, 2025). These practices and financial set-ups make enforcing compliance with land governance frameworks even more challenging.

Responding to the shortcomings and future pathways

Focus on policy implementation

Thirteen years after the VGGT were endorsed, this report found that 71 countries (about 35 percent) have approved substantive land tenure-related policy and legislation, 27 of which used the VGGT as a reference, to varying extents. Considerable evidence indicates that international land dialogue and guidance have impacted policy and legislation at the national level (Wegerif, Coulibaly and Ouedraogo, 2025).

However, despite the achievements of the VGGT and some notable trends towards responsible land governance, impact has remained uneven. Impact at the country level is constrained by the limited uptake of key principles, notably fair access to land, responsible investments, transparency, accountability, gender, consultation, and FPIC. Furthermore, as shown in this report, major obstacles exist, including the lack of implementation and even avoidance due to political economy challenges. Other obstacles include related land conflicts and crises, as well as bureaucratic inefficiencies and weak state capacity. The increasing concentration, non-compliance with the principles of responsible investment in large-scale land acquisitions (Land Matrix, 2022), as well as the persistent limitations on women's land rights, bear witness to these constraints.

Strong political commitment and broad societal engagement with the policy process are necessary to translate into measurable outcomes. There is a continued need for awareness-raising, sensitization, and capacity development among all stakeholders, especially right holders and duty bearers, at both national and regional levels. Nevertheless, to build momentum, make and track progress against the SDGs, and hold stakeholders to account, there is a need to secure new and reinforced specific country-level commitments on land tenure security. Such commitments should be agreed upon by all actors in the context of existing frameworks (including CFS's VGGT and RAIs, AU F&Gs, UNDROP, UNDRIP).

In addition, progress on land tenure and governance requires a stronger, more comprehensive, and better-coordinated approach to change, both within the land sector and in conjunction with global efforts on economic recovery, climate action, biodiversity conservation, and open societies.

The multilateral system, along with multi-actor mechanisms, plays a crucial role in establishing a roadmap and coordinating global action on tenure security through 2030 and beyond. It also promotes international cooperation, sets standards, monitors progress, and facilitates the exchange of knowledge and best practices (Box 7.4). At the same time, it supports the necessary mainstreaming of land issues across other sectors. Responsible land governance will only be implemented at scale if it is effectively integrated across sectoral boundaries. There is a need to work in partnership with other sectors and stakeholders to ensure that action on tenure security is duly recognized and prioritized in the UNFCCC, UNCBD, and UNCCD, as well as in the G20 and other relevant global processes. Such a system is essential for addressing global challenges related to land, including food security, climate change, and human rights, which require coordinated action across geographic (UN, 2025) and sectoral (UNCCD and Landesa, 2022) boundaries.

Box 7.4

Advancing political commitment on land reform and tenure security

In 2006, in Porto Alegre, Brazil hosted the FAO International Conference on Agrarian Reform and Rural Development (ICARRD). The conference was a landmark in advancing international understanding and dialogue on issues related to access to land and its critical role in combating hunger, rural poverty and achieving sustainable rural development. This multilateral conference brought together 92 government delegations, including 25 ministers, as well as 150 representatives of CSOs among a broader public of about 1 400 participants (FAO, 2006). The ICARRD final declaration called for concrete actions to promote more equitable access to and inclusive, transparent and accountable governance of land and natural resources. It invited the Committee on World Food Security (CFS), as a multi-stakeholder platform, to follow up on its recommendations. In 2012, the CFS endorsed the Voluntary Guidelines on Responsible Governance of Tenure (VGGT), as the key international reference for land tenure standards (Hall, Scoones and Henley, 2016). Precisely twenty years later, in February 2026, the Government of Colombia, with technical support from FAO, will host the second International Conference on Agrarian Reform and Rural Development (ICARRD+20).

Its aim will be to relaunch the 2006 dialogue on agrarian reform, remobilize political commitment and international cooperation on land reform, take stock of the achievements since 2006, and develop strategies towards upscaling effective reform and change on the ground.

More recently, the Global Action for Land (GAL) initiative has pursued similar progress in advancing political commitment to land reform and tenure security. In contrast to ICARRD's multilateral approach, GAL aims at establishing a global multistakeholder forum for setting commitments, track and discuss progress, and catalyze and increase funding.

Sources: Authors' own elaboration based on sources listed in the References section.

Equitable and inclusive governance in times of increased pressures

To design effective land policies, it is essential to understand existing tenure dynamics, the social and institutional drivers of tenure insecurity, and how unequal access to land, financial resources, and decision-making power shape outcomes (Larsen *et al.*, 2023; Lawry *et al.*, 2023).

Land tenure is not just a technical matter but a profoundly political issue rooted in historical power dynamics and social structures.

Approaches that focus exclusively on technical solutions, without sufficient attention to underlying structural drivers, risk reinforcing dynamics that continue to marginalize certain groups and customary communities in vulnerable situations (FAO and FILAC, 2021; Sander *et al.*, 2025). For instance, securing tenure alone may be insufficient to prevent encroachment if extractive industries and large-scale land acquisitions remain unchecked and are not based on free, prior, and informed consent (Land Matrix, 2022).

For land governance to be effective, an enabling environment is needed: one that moves beyond technocratic, top-down approaches and supports inclusive, rights-based governance. Multi-stakeholder land governance systems at country level can enhance participatory policymaking, monitor implementation in their jurisdictions, and evaluate the impact of land governance and rights on food security, sustainable development, gender equality, and peace (FAO, 2012). Stronger governance frameworks, community participation, and mechanisms to address power imbalances are crucial for protecting land rights and resources. Creating robust legal and institutional structures, ensuring inclusive decision-making processes, and actively mitigating power imbalances are all necessary to enable equitable access and management of land and resources (Springer *et al.*, 2021). Multi-Stakeholder Platforms (MSPs) are increasingly recognized as a crucial tool for promoting inclusive land governance (FAO, 2021, Box 7.5).

Box 7.5

MSPs recognized as a crucial tool for promoting inclusive land governance

MSPs bring together diverse groups to address land tenure issues, facilitate dialogue, and develop solutions for improved governance and access to natural resources. They can operate at various scales, from local to national, and are essential for fostering collaboration, addressing power imbalances, and ensuring that land reforms are effective and sustainable.

Although necessary conditions exist (such as ensuring genuine inclusivity, sustainability, and institutionalization, monitoring, and evaluation [FAO, 2021]), MSPs can develop new and forward-thinking practices and approaches to improve governance of tenure at multiple levels. When linked to a well-defined national land agenda and supported by a strong intersectoral approach, they can represent a strong foundation and have a significant impact on inclusive land policy and sustainable development (FAO, 2021; Sulle, Ka and Dio, 2017).

Source: Authors' own elaboration based on sources listed in the References section.

Equitable and inclusive governance, especially during times of increased pressure, requires prioritizing the needs of all members of society and ensuring fair representation in decision-making processes. It also fosters a sense of belonging and active participation. Such governance involves actively addressing inequalities, promoting transparency, and building trust between citizens and institutions. This challenge is particularly acute for women and youth who play pivotal roles in sustaining land governance and managing natural resources (UN Women, 2013; UNDP, 2017; Lemke and Claeys, 2020). Nevertheless, they frequently face structural barriers to accessing land ownership, finance, and decision-making spaces (Calmon *et al.*, 2021). As such, land strategies must explicitly confront gender and generational inequalities, ensuring meaningful participation of women and other marginalized groups in land governance and policymaking (World Bank, 2021a).

Under increased pressures and when other objectives are considered - such as for example climate change and environmental goals, managing land tenure and governance processes may involve significant socio-economic trade-offs, such as access to natural resources or services (den Braber *et al.*, 2024), and exacerbate disparities in income and internal inequalities (Holland and Diop, 2022).

It is essential to critically examine issues such as uneven resource access, the risk of land concentration under climate goals, the balance between various and competing objectives and the subsistence needs of local people (World Bank, 2021b).Understanding and accounting for the trade-offs and impacts of numerous policies – such as large investment projects or climate mitigation policies – are critical. It is the first step toward designing a more equitable and sustainable development framework.

Additionally, ensuring accessibility of institutions, information, and procedures for formalizing land tenure rights is fundamental (Ali *et al.*, 2019; Larson and Springer, 2016). Such measures include providing a safe and enabling environment with practical guarantees such as access to justice and protection mechanisms for environmental defenders (e.g., Peru's Escazú Agreement), especially where they face threats, criminalization, or violence.

Securing land for all

Land tenure systems encompass a wide range of arrangements and bundles of rights tailored to local contexts (FAO, 2002; Cotula, 2007; RRI, 2012). This report categorizes and quantifies the shares of public (28 percent), private (20 percent), and customary land (42 percent). Although theoretical categories oversimplify the multiple variations inherent to the complexities of land tenure systems on the ground (Scoones, 2023), they allow for sketching a global state of land tenure and land tenure security or insecurity.

As such, globally, 55 percent of the world's lands remain undocumented (with 10 percent of land having unclear status). The finding applies in particular to the 5.5 billion ha (42 percent of the world's land) designated to Indigenous Peoples, and other holders of customary tenure rights, for which only 1 billion ha (8 percent of the world's land or 18 percent of the world's customary lands) are documented with ownership rights. In addition, 23 percent of the global adult population, representing approximately 1.1 billion people, reported feeling insecure about their rights to land and housing. This share has increased over recent years, from 19 percent to 23 percent between 2020 and 2024 (Prindex, 2024), mainly related to a series of negative shocks, numerous conflicts and displacements, as well as financial instabilities.

Tenure insecurity can affect all forms of tenure (Prindex, 2024). In other words, tenure security is not peculiar to any specific tenure system, nor is it automatically linked to formalization (titling, legal recognition, and enforcement). As such, although this report shows that recognition and documentation of tenure rights are major drivers of tenure security, it also shows that tenure insecurity is not necessarily linked to the absence of formal ownership documentation.

As a fundamental aspect of the right to adequate housing, the right to food, and other rights recognized in international human rights law, everyone should have the right to feel stable and secure in their housing and land, without fear of forced eviction or displacement. The focus is twofold. On the one hand, this emphasizes that everyone should have the right to secure land rights. On one hand, this emphasizes that everyone should have the right to secure land rights. While, on the other hand, this is irrespective of the tenure systems, whether through ownership, tenancy, or other recognized forms of tenure (FAO, 2012; United Nations and OHCHR, 2015).

Additionally, land is considered essential for social and economic development (GIZ, 2019). Land tenure policies are thus tasked with the dual function of recognizing the legitimate tenure rights of all rights holders, on the one hand, and encouraging the pursuit of inclusive and resilient rural development and sustainable food systems, on the other. These policies include actions for achieving gender equality, guaranteeing access to land for small producers who need it to lift themselves out of poverty, and linking recognition to access to climate finance for the adoption of climate change adaptation and mitigation practices, among others (GIZ, 2019).

Securing women's land rights

Based on SDG indicator 5.a.1, 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. Additionally, on a legal level, while constitutional provisions for gender equality are common, data indicate that many countries' legal frameworks fall short of fully recognizing and protecting women's land rights. Among 88 reporting countries, 58 percent have adopted only limited or no legal measures securing women's land rights, aligned with SDG 5.a.2. Furthermore, in the large majority of the countries where provision for women's land rights has been made in policy and/or legislation, no significant progress can be observed in practice.

Securing women's rights to land involves ensuring women have equal access to land ownership, inheritance, and decision-making processes related to land. It also requires addressing structural inequalities and cultural norms that hinder women's access and rights to land. Several conditions are worth highlighting here.

> ***Gender-responsive legal and policy frameworks are crucial for promoting women's land rights.***

They must be harmonized across laws and sectors (e.g., family and land laws), especially where legal pluralism exists. Implementation and enforcement based on the principles of the rule of law are equally vital. This underscores the importance of enabling environments and implementation. In many countries, discriminatory laws and policies persist and need to be revised to guarantee women's land rights (OHCHR, 2017). However, as documented in Chapter 4, even where such legal provisions and policies exist, their implementation may be sporadic.

Reaching rural communities is a challenge, as is the heterogeneity of women, some of whom may be excluded on the basis of their marital status. This emphasizes the need to address the land rights of all women, whether single, married, separated, divorced, or widowed, as well as the rights of female land users in different groups (Indigenous Peoples, pastoralists, among others) (OHCHR and UN Women, 2013).

As such, women's land rights must be understood and addressed within varied sociocultural and economic contexts, including patriarchal structures, inequitable social institutions, and norms. This understanding supports efforts to sensitize local authorities and communities, improve women's legal literacy, and strengthen their leadership and representation at all levels (OHCHR and UN Women, 2013). Contributions stress the need to increase women's awareness of their rights to inherit land, own land, and participate in land governance, but also to target traditional authorities and involve men (World Bank, 2024).

> ***Given the various ways women can own land – formally or informally, individually or collectively, on private or communal land – focusing on land tenure security rather than just formal land titles is essential (Doss and Meinzen-Dick, 2020).***

This also includes integrating women into decision-making institutions, such as land management committees and land tribunals, which will help shift social norms, support women's rights, and ultimately enhance their capacity to contribute to more representative decision-making processes around land (OHCHR and UN Women, 2013; Salcedo-La Viña and Morarji, 2016).

This will necessitate breaking stereotypes (through awareness-raising, engagement of community leaders, and promotion of women's leadership, among others) and fostering collaboration and partnerships at all levels, among governments, civil society organizations, international agencies, and local communities to effectively address women's land rights. While implementation challenges persist, examples of countries where laws, policies, and development programmes involving the state that have had a positive impact and can be replicated exist (FAO, 2005; USAID, 2006; ActionAid, 2008; ILC, 2012).

Securing customary land rights

Despite histories of colonization, discrimination, and ongoing socio-political challenges, customary communities have shown remarkable resourcefulness, innovation, and leadership in sustaining their practices and knowledge (Dawson *et al.*, 2021). Following historical efforts to individualize common tenure rights, recent years have seen a more context-sensitive approach to recognizing and formalizing customary lands (which, as shown in the report, operate under various modalities) to provide legal protection to these prevalent tenure systems (Cotula, 2007; Alden Wily, 2018; Sauls, Galeana and Lawry, 2022).

Nevertheless, of the 42 percent of global lands under customary tenure, only 8 percent are fully recognized and documented, another 13 percent have limited designated use rights, while the large majority (21 percent) remain unrecognized. This report shows an increasing body of evidence that collective and customary governance can be effective at maintaining and restoring ecosystems. Indigenous Peoples, Afro-descendant Peoples, pastoralist communities, forest dwellers, fisherfolks, and tribal and mobile groups that inhabit these territories have developed systems of norms, institutions, and practices to manage and govern the lands, forests, grasslands, and fisheries as renewable common property resources.

> ***Given that customary land rights extend over 42 percent of the global terrestrial area, encompassing large swaths of forests, grasslands/savannahs, deserts, glaciers/tundra, as well as important coastal ecosystems, efforts by states to recognize and protect the rights of customary land users must be accelerated.***

Alongside land tenure reforms and legal recognition of customary land rights, most communities require adequate financial and technical support to tackle local social, economic, and environmental challenges. This support includes customary governance capacity building, organizational development, access to capital and technical knowledge, the development of transparent and equitable benefit-sharing arrangements, and infrastructure (WRI and Climate Focus, 2022). Without these enabling conditions, customary communities face significant barriers to effectively managing and protecting their lands.

Policy and investment pathways must enable these communities to continue accessing, managing, and benefiting from these ecosystems and their resources. These include a range of interventions beyond the recognition of customary rights, such as community resource management and co-management arrangements that recognize customary communities as equal partners in design, decision-making, and implementation of climate solutions (Prouchet *et al.*, 2023). Such an approach requires upholding the principles of Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC), respecting self-determination, and integrating Indigenous Peoples' knowledge into climate governance frameworks (Delgado Pugley, 2024; WRI and Climate Focus, 2022).

The report also argues that recognizing Indigenous Peoples, and other customary communities, does not entail stereotypes that romanticize or essentialize them as inherently harmonious with nature and static over time. Evidence suggests that customary territories have undergone transformation over time and are now facing agroecological degradation (Borras and Franco, 2018; Franco and Borras, 2021). While links between customary tenure and improved forest outcomes are increasingly recognized (FAO and FILAC, 2021; Sander *et al.*, 2025), outcomes vary by region, governance structures, and legal frameworks (Busch and Ferretti-Gallon, 2023).

In sub-Saharan Africa, for example, results have been less positive, in part due to complex community dynamics, diverse tenure systems, although more research is needed (Bromley, 2008; Sander *et al.*, 2025).

Similarly, stereotyping customary communities risks ignoring several imbalances for land and resources and obscure the complexity of their social, political, and economic realities (Lahiri-Dutt *et al.*, 2014; High, 2015). The report has shown the persistence of strong intra-household gender inequalities, as some customary systems do not fully recognize equal inheritance rights for widows and daughters, or grant women more limited forms of land access (Calmon *et al.*, 2021), for which it is recommended to take provisions asserting that the principle of non-discrimination or gender equality takes precedence over customary law in case of conflicts. It has also shown the hybrid nature of livelihood activities, where traditional practices merge with extractive industries, agriculture, and service economies, and blend traditional knowledge, governance, practices, and beliefs with new systems, technologies, and institutions, enabling adaptation to changing ecological and socioeconomic conditions (Gómez-Baggethun, Corbera and Reyes-García, 2013).

Addressing growing land inequalities

The largest 10 percent of farms operate an estimated 89 percent of all agricultural lands globally. The situation in Asia, characterized by the lowest regional inequality level (where the largest 10 percent of farms control 50 percent of agricultural land), is telling. Furthermore, land inequality is even higher in all regions when land rights are considered, both by considering only documented or alienable land rights and when land quality and landlessness are factored in.

Over the last twenty years, two major trends have affected farmland distribution and concentration, both related to increasing interest in farmland, especially following the food price and financial crises in 2008 and 2009 (Anseeuw *et al.*, 2012). The first one is characterized by large-scale land acquisitions (LSLAs) by domestic and foreign investors. Although LSLAs have slowed down, evidence of a long-term trend of growing commercial interest in land remains related to increased interest in land for conservation and carbon storage. The second one relates to the corporatization and financialization of farms into complex corporate and shareholding structures. These trends are associated with shifts in tenure and land ownership patterns, including the emergence of larger farm units or land reserves (some cases linked to climate-related finance), which may, in certain contexts, undermine the legitimate rights of smallholder farmers, Indigenous Peoples, and other customary communities. Not only have corporate holdings led to increasing holding sizes and contributed to land concentration, but 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 (Box 7.4; Safer, 2023).

High land concentration combined with limited access for smaller farms can pose social and economic sustainability risks, particularly when the non-farm job creation stalls, especially in regions that have not completed their demographic transition (Losch, Fréguin-Gresh and White, 2012).

Current patterns of structural change show the growth of low-income and informal jobs in the service sector, alongside deindustrialization or insufficient industrialization (Rodrik, 2016; Ravindran and Babu, 2021). The persistence of rural poverty at the lower end of the farm size distribution, when combined with the patterns above, calls attention to the role of expanded access to land. In countries with both private and public land availability, 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. Where redistribution is not on the agenda due to land scarcity or political sensitivities, other policies, including rent and tenancy control, as well as regulations against land concentration, can be deployed (Pierri *et al.*, 2025).

Enhanced financing and stronger partnerships

In the broad area of responsible land governance, investments are required at various stages to develop and implement responsible land policy measures. Alongside this, the establishment or updating of modern land administration systems that facilitate the implementation of these policies and laws through mapping, delimitation, and documenting of land parcels, as well as the establishment of land information systems (for example, cadastres), are expensive and long-term processes (Prosterman and Hanstad, 2006). These require large technical and financial investments, often supported by a multiplicity of funding mechanisms, and for which the mobilization of a broad range of stakeholders is needed (Enemark, 2015; World Bank, 2020).

On one hand, although there is no valuation of funding needed for land reform globally (unlike for biodiversity and climate action [European Commission, 2022; European Investment Bank, 2023; Grabbe and Moffat, 2024]), there is a need to catalyze and increase funding for land tenure and governance. To advance progress at scale requires an increase in international and national funding for work on land tenure and land governance, as well as a significant improvement in the quality and effectiveness of support provided (Prosterman and Hanstad, 2006; Forest Tenure Funders Group, 2022). This will require increased funding commitments from governments, bilateral donors, multilateral development banks, and private sources. Considering the mainstreaming and importance of land tenure for global issues such as climate change and biodiversity, among others, mobilizing funding from other sectors should be reinforced. The importance of climate finance in support of securing customary land rights is illustrative of this (Box 7.6). Similar cross-sectoral funding mechanisms for land tenure could be considered within broader frameworks, such as peace and resilience, territorial development, or sustainable commodity and value chains, among others.

Box 7.6

Funding and cost of securing customary lands – the role of climate finance

As noted above, particular attention should be given to securing customary lands. Financial support is crucial for customary territories to address historical injustices, promote self-determination, and ensure sustainable development. This support can take many forms, including funding for land rights, cultural preservation, education, healthcare, and economic development initiatives (UNDP, 2024). To do so, supporting the mapping, delimiting, and titling of customary territories is essential.

According to RRI and Tenure Facility (2021), for governments, cost estimates for mapping, delimiting, and titling Indigenous Peoples', and other customary communities', territories (excluding the costs of managing these territories) across 24 countries amount to USD 8.9 billion – approximately USD 315 million annually until 2050.

Current levels of finance and official development aid for Indigenous Peoples, customary communities, and organizations are not commensurate with their roles and are insufficient to support the management of customary lands (Rainforest Foundation Norway, 2021), thereby undermining their stewardship role in climate and biodiversity management. To overcome this, a group of 22 donors (including governments and private funders) pledged USD 1.7 billion between 2021 and 2025 to support Indigenous Peoples, and other customary communities. Announced at the UNFCCC COP 26 in Glasgow, the Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities Forest Tenure Pledge is a funding commitment to help secure land tenure and promote forest guardianship for Indigenous Peoples, and other customary communities (Forest Tenure Funders Group, 2022). The Pledge seeks to mobilize greater and more effective donor support for forest communities in tropical forest countries. It is also a recognition that Indigenous Peoples, and customary communities, face significant barriers to accessing finance, with only a small fraction of funds reaching them directly (Forest Tenure Funders Group, 2022).

While the total amount of funds dedicated to securing land rights increased from USD 321 million in 2021 to USD 494 million in 2022, the percentage of direct funds allocated to Indigenous Peoples, and other customary communities, decreased from 2.9 percent to 2.1 percent. Approximately 51 percent of the total funds were allocated to international NGOs. As of 2023, however, nearly USD 1.34 billion (79 percent of the total pledge) had been disbursed; approximately USD 55 million (10.6 percent) was directly allocated to Indigenous Peoples and local communities organizations in 2023 (Forest Tenure Funders Group, 2023).

Sources: Authors' own elaboration based on sources listed in the References section.

On the other hand, besides more funding, there is also a need for better-adapted funding. To improve the quality and effectiveness of funding, differentiated funding mechanisms are necessary to better reach beneficiaries, particularly land users (Rainforest Foundation Norway, 2021; Hughes et al., 2025).

These mechanisms should mainly target women and youth, as well as Indigenous Peoples, and other customary communities, to strengthen their land rights and responsible land governance overall. The Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities Forest Tenure Pledge is a good example (Box 7.6). Its 2023 annual report reveals that only a small fraction of the funding goes straight to Indigenous Peoples and community groups (10.6 percent of the USD 1.34 billion disbursed as of 2033). In contrast, the majority of the total funds, approximately 51 percent, were allocated to international NGOs. While there is progress, challenges in scaling direct funding include a lack of capacity, weak local institutions, unrecognized land rights (Ford Foundation, 2023), as well as overly rigid due diligence processes and stringent project monitoring requirements (Rainforest Alliance, 2022). The importance of effective participation and inclusion of beneficiaries, such as Indigenous Peoples, and customary communities, in decision-making, programme design, and implementation is also highlighted by Indigenous Peoples, and other customary communities, themselves. Their call for 'Our Pledge'[8] (Forest Tenure Funders Group, 2023; Brock *et al.*, 2023) reinforces this point.

Strengthening data, evidence and transparency

As shown in this report, the availability of and access to land data have expanded in recent years. As datasets become more accessible and comprehensive, they help understand the current state, advance evidence-based decision-making, and ultimately support progress toward achieving tenure security and the SDGs overall.

Notwithstanding such progress, land data availability is still relatively low, and the quality and consistency of data remain uneven, limiting interoperability. The land sector remains among the least open globally, with much of the relevant data still undigitized or not collected at all. The limited reporting on SDG indicators 1.4.2, 5.a.1, and 5.a.2, beyond the technical data issues and capacities to report, is illustrative of this trend.

8 See the 'Our Pledge' (***https://ourpledge.earth/***) and '#ThePledgeWeWant' (***https://thepledgewewant.com/***) campaigns and platforms.

Land data need continuous strengthening to better document the complex and contextualized dynamics of tenure and governance. As such, first, innovative metrics, such as security perceptions, cultural values, and spiritual significance (Salmerón Manzano and Mazano Agugliaro, 2023), will enable results and subsequent policies to better reflect the land's complexities and specificities. They will be better adapted to local priorities and realities (instead of metrics reflecting externally imposed frameworks) (Huntington and Stevens, 2023). Second, data needs to be strengthened within the framework of rapidly evolving contexts and practices, such as the transition to shareholding setups to control land (Safer, 2024) and competing land claims and external pressures (Salmerón-Manzano and Manzano-Agugliaro, 2023). Third, there is a need to develop data for all. Too many, whether they are land tenure systems or population groups, remain underrepresented in land data. Data collection efforts on women's land rights, Indigenous Peoples, and customary land rights holders, as well as youth and elders, are particularly affected and still require expansion and harmonization in many countries and regions. Insufficient reporting on indicators such as SDG 5.a.1 and SDG 1.4.2 underscores this issue.

Land data should be strengthened by broadening the scope of data sources and collection methods.

Globally, initiatives are increasingly using digital tools, such as satellite mapping and mobile apps, to support the mapping, registration, and titling of customary land rights. These efforts help bridge critical information gaps (United Nations Committee of Experts on Global Geospatial Information Management, 2020). At the same time, equally essential are the promotion of complementary data sources, support for community-led research and data, and the mobilization of traditional knowledge systems. As described in Chapter 2, these broader data ecosystems enable better documentation of the aforementioned land tenure and governance complexities and specificities. Complementary data sources will also enable more inclusiveness and objectivity (Global Partnership for Sustainable Development Data, 2023).

Recognizing and valuing traditional knowledge systems enables customary communities to lead in monitoring efforts, enhancing accountability and transparency. Such recognition allows communities to track progress, identify risks, exercise oversight, and raise grievances, ultimately holding policymakers and investors accountable. The promotion of community data in CBD's Global Biodiversity Framework presents a timely opportunity to close such data gaps through participatory and citizen science approaches that incorporate locally grounded knowledge (Caviedes *et al.*, 2023).

To respond to the need for better data and broadened data sources, greater collaboration across the land data community is needed. These efforts include not only building the skills to use them effectively but also establishing the mechanisms and systems to generate, produce, and share data (GPSDD, 2023). These efforts go beyond technical goals – they contribute directly to transparency, accountability, power relations, and broader development outcomes. To this end, it is necessary to strengthen land data governance. Measures include clear data-sharing agreements, common standards, and active cooperation among all data holders. It should also include multistakeholder data initiatives and inclusive data processes to strengthen data ecosystems and enable contributions from all stakeholders, providing visibility to all land-related situations (ALLIED and ILC, 2023; United Nations, 2024). Besides better understanding, addressing, and monitoring the land situation more broadly, such efforts will also facilitate advances in the availability and use of inclusive and disaggregated data, ensuring that governments and organizations leave no one behind (Global Partnership for Sustainable Development Data [GPSDD], 2023).

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Chapter 1

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Chapter 5

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Chapter 6

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