



Good Practice

Global Programme Responsible Land Policy

UGANDA: A self-financing model in customary land registration

July 2025

The Responsible Land Policy in Uganda (RELAPU) project Starting point

The Global Programme Responsible Land Policy (GPRLP) is a component of the Special Initiative "Transformation of Agricultural and Food Systems," funded by the German Federal Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ). GPRLP operates in Laos, Peru, Paraguay, Benin, Uganda, Ethiopia, Madagascar, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Niger, and Cameroon.



In Uganda, the GPRLP is implemented through the Responsible Land Policy in Uganda (RELAPU) project, led by Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH and funded by BMZ. The project is currently active in the districts of Dokolo (Amwoma, Batta, Agwata, and Dokolo Tubur sub-counties) and Amolatar (Muntu and Agwingiri) with direct project funding, as well as in central Uganda under the Improvement of Land Governance in Uganda (ILGU) project. RELAPU aims to improve land access for specific population groups, particularly women and marginalized communities in north-eastern Uganda, as a critical step toward reducing poverty and hunger in rural areas.

RELAPU's comprehensive approach to enhancing land rights and governance focuses on institutional improvement, which includes strengthening frameworks and processes to protect land rights. Key activities include a systematic land inventory to establish the basis for issuing land ownership and land use certificates.

Additionally, RELAPU seeks to empower civil society in advocating for responsible land policies, enhance its capacity to inform the public, and guide Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) processes. The project promotes dialogue with the government and private sector and strengthens partnerships with civil society as a key implementing partner. Finally, RELAPU engages agricultural investors to raise awareness of responsible land policy.

Between 2016 and 2022, RELAPU piloted a self-financing model for customary land demarcation and registration in the Teso sub-region (Soroti and Katakwi districts) and later scaled it to the Lango sub-region. This model is based on the beneficiary contributory model. It enables landowners to co-finance registration activities, leveraging existing government and community structures to close funding gaps in the land sector.

Starting point: In Uganda, 18 million parcels of customary land, making out 80% of all land, are unregistered



A RELAPU staff member co-facilitating an awareness-raising session in Banda Sub-County, Mityana District



A female land surveyor trains the Banda Sub-County Area Land Committee in using improved fit-for-purpose technologies, while a female landowner observes and provides her details

In Uganda, agriculture is a cornerstone of the economy, employing approximately 72% of the population and contributing 24.1% to GDP. However, most land remains unregistered in the Uganda National Land Information System (UgNLIS), leaving communities vulnerable to insecurity, land disputes, and limited economic opportunities.

Uganda operates under four parallel land tenure systems: freehold, leasehold, Mailo, and customary tenure. While urban freehold and leasehold titles are largely registered, customary tenure, which accounts for 80% of all land (and 90% in the northern region), remains vastly undocumented.¹ Approximately 18 million parcels of customary land are unregistered, with only around 150,000 Certificates of Customary Ownership (CCOs) issued, many lacking standardized procedures or digital records.

The lack of systematic registration perpetuates tenure insecurity, impedes agricultural productivity, and hinders the empowerment of women and minority groups. Although customary tenure is recognized under the

1995 Constitution and the Land Act, it is still treated as inferior compared to titled forms of ownership, as highlighted in Uganda's National Land Policy (2013). Yet, there is a strong legal foundation for land registration, anchored in the Land Act (1998), its 2010 amendment, and the 2018 National Plan by the Ministry of Lands, Housing, and Urban Development (MLHUD), which advocates for modern Fit-For-Purpose principles to register all land and establish a nationwide land administration system.

Despite these frameworks, only 75,000 parcels of customary land have been mapped and issued CCOs over the past decade, largely due to the estimated €500 million cost for countrywide registration. While development partners like the World Bank and European Union have funded pilot projects, these initiatives address only a fraction of the issue, even as pressure on customary land continues to grow.

1. UN Habitat, GLTN (2016) *Fit-For-Purpose Land Administration Guiding Principles For Country Implementation*, available at <https://unhabitat.org/sites/default/files/download-manager-files/Fit-For-Purpose%20Land%20Administration.pdf>, accessed on 7/11/2023.

Positive change: In Bululu, landowners are willing to pay the equivalent of 14 euros to register their customary land

Between 2016 and 2022, GIZ supported customary land registration efforts in four districts and eleven sub-counties, resulting in the identification and demarcation of over 21,000 parcels and the issuance of more than 11,000 Certificates of Customary Ownership (CCOs).

Studies demonstrate that Fit-for-Purpose mass systematic registration is both feasible and can be completed within a reasonable timeframe. GIZ cost analyses indicate that registration costs can be reduced to less than €20 per parcel, with actual field costs averaging around €14 per parcel.

In total, 243 villagers in Bululu contributed UGX 9,627,411 (€2,283) to the pilot. This initiative also led to increased revenue collection in the sub-county: from €1,660 before self-financing to €1,897 in 2021/22 (+14.3%), €2,371 in 2022/23 (+25%), and €2,846 in 2023/24 (+20%).

The initial trainings in Bululu cost approximately €7,300, compared to about €1,900 per sub-county with a more targeted approach. The scaling of the model to five additional sites prioritized building the capacities of mandated land service structures to operate at a standard level. This involved training Area Land Committees



A household head helping his wife and children thresh their harvested beans

“A functional, fit-for-purpose, sustainable, localized self-financing model for customary land registration is now in place in pilot areas”

The willingness of villagers to contribute financially to the process has been evident in pilot areas. For instance, during the Bululu pilot, 235 villagers—16.3% of the 1,446 households—were willing to pay a base fee of UGX 55,000 (approximately €14) per parcel to support the preparation and issuance of CCOs.

(ALCs), sub-county technical staff, councilors, and District Land Boards (DLBs) through relevant modules. These trained individuals then transferred knowledge to community members, avoiding broad stakeholder training that included non-mandated participants. A Fit-for-Purpose approach in capacity development significantly reduces initiation costs.

The fee structures also provide flexibility to subsidize vulnerable groups. A solidarity mechanism introduced in Bululu included slightly higher rates for commercial farmers or larger land holdings, while the leadership applied reduced land registration service fees for widows, orphans, and individuals with disabilities.

Approach: The 7-steps self-financing model for customary land registration

The self-financing pilot in Bululu was designed to test the beneficiary contributory model for registering customary land at the local community level. It capitalized on the willingness of many landholders to contribute to registration costs, driven by a growing awareness of the benefits of secure land rights. Local populations increasingly recognize the value of “secured access to land,” which has created a strong demand for the initiative.

The pilot aimed to combine Fit-for-Purpose principles with a contributory model that mobilizes funding to facilitate the steps required for registering customary land and obtaining a Certificate of Customary Ownership (CCO). On one hand, the approach sought to enhance the capacities of local land authorities to issue CCOs effectively. On the other hand, it aimed to improve their understanding of public financial management. By engaging in discussions about fee structures, the model guided local authorities to better comprehend the costs associated with land demarcation and the subsequent production of certificates.

Under the self-financing model, the Senior Land Management Officer (SLMO) is critical for overseeing the process at the district level, guiding recorders and stakeholders at the sub-county level to ensure that land registration complies with legislation. The SLMO also leads a team of Trainers of Trainers (TOTs) to build the capacity of various stakeholders across implementation areas within the district.

To set up the self-financing model for customary land registration, local authorities should follow a seven-step approach:

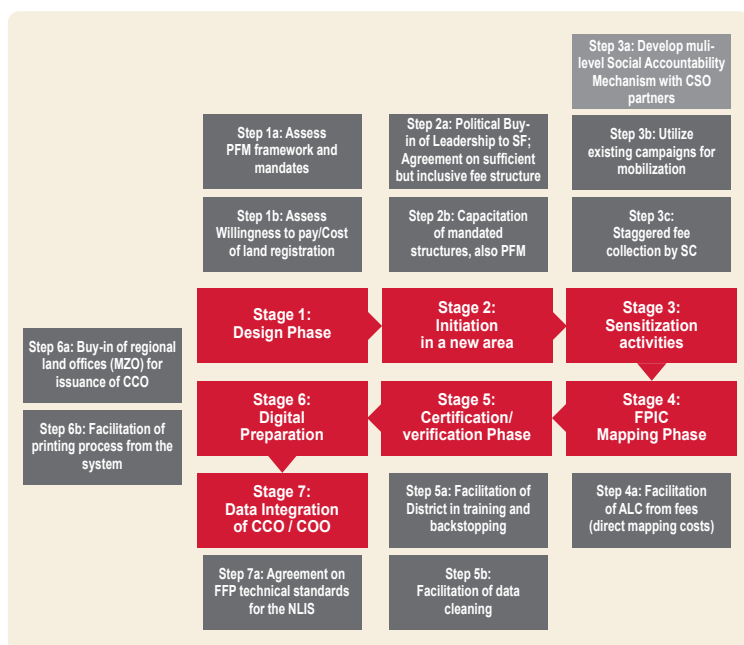


Figure 1 : Figure illustrating the different steps of the self-financing model for land registration

1.Design Phase

- Assess Project Finance Management (PFM) framework and mandates.
- Assess willingness to pay / cost of land registration.

2.Initiation in a new area

- Political Buy-in of Leadership to self-financing programme; Agreement on sufficient but inclusive structure.
- Public Finance Management-PFM and Capacitation of mandated structures.

3.Sensitization activities

- Development of multi-level social accountability mechanism with CSO partners.
- Utilization of existing campaigns for mobilisation.
- Staggered fee collection by the sub-county

4.Free, Prior and Informed Consent Mapping Phase

- Facilitation of ALC, ScPPC, DLB and recorder from fees (direct mapping costs) approach.

5.Certification / verification phase

- Facilitation of district in training and backstopping.
- Facilitation of data cleaning.

6.Digital Preparation

- Buy-in of regional land offices (MZO) for issuance of CCO
- Facilitation of printing process from the system

7.Data Integration of CCO / COO

- o Agreement on FFP technical standards for the NLIS.

Capacity building is critical to anchor the approach

While the self-financing model is designed to cover operational costs at the sub-county level, it does not address the essential start-up investment costs, which must be sourced from other channels. It is highly recommended that support be provided to assist and guide the sub-county and the Area Land Committee (ALC), ideally from a development partner (DP), a well-informed NGO/CSO, or a Ministry support function.

The start-up costs include, among others, capacity building, the acquisition of mapping equipment, kick-off meetings, equipping the recorder's office, and obtaining the necessary Information, Education and Communication (IEC) materials and legal books.

To support the implementation of the approach, a capacity development strategy was established, incorporating a tailored syllabus as a measure to ensure

effective knowledge transfer. This strategy primarily relies on existing government institutions and structures, enabling ongoing knowledge dissemination even in cases of staff turnover or when scaling the model to new regions. Crucially, the implementation is fully led by mandated government entities, including recorders, Area Land Committees (ALCs), and District Land Offices (DLOs), ensuring alignment with official land governance frameworks.

CD strategy Cascade								
master trainers from MLHUD & partners								
District								
DPO	(DCO,DCDO,DAO,DLO)	DLO		District surveyor	Physical planner	CAO/PAS	NEMA(DNRO/DEO)	backstopping
Mapping Tools+Equipment		DLB induction (Land Administration)		verification; quality insurance; monitoring	Natural protection	Ressource	Physical Planning	
Sub-county								
Sacao		Accountant	ScPPC (SACAO, CDO, Agric, Health)	CDO	ALC	Parish Chiefs &Para surveyors	LCIII courts + Council	Para legals
					cultural authorities, youth, women			
Community level								

Figure 2 : Cascade for Capacity Development Strategy

Lessons learned

For the self-financing model to succeed, capacity building plays a pivotal role in ensuring an effective and self-funded land mapping process. Political leaders and key opinion leaders can inspire broader community participation by taking the initiative to map their own land, serving as examples for others to follow. Targeted sensitization efforts at the village or cluster level are crucial to secure informed consent from households and to guarantee the inclusion of vulnerable individuals in the land registration process.

The success of the model also relies on both political and technical leaders taking full ownership of the process, fostering accountability and commitment. Training and establishing Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) committees is essential to support vulnerable individuals in resolving any land disputes that may arise during or after the registration process. Additionally, providing sub-county leaders with informational materials ensures they have reliable reference tools to guide village sensitizations effectively.

Regular backstopping by district land office staff, ideally on a monthly basis, helps to maintain momentum and address any technical challenges. Strong collaboration between political and technical leaders is equally critical to ensure the model's seamless implementation. Finally,

in villages where Local Council 1 leaders take the lead in mapping their land and demonstrate active commitment, there is a notable increase in the willingness of households to apply for land registration, further strengthening the model's impact.

The model presented relies on initial investment at the district and sub-county levels, followed by activities based at the sub-county level. However, it is challenging to envision how the district can make the initial investment without external funding or direct support from the Government of Uganda (GoU). Additionally, there are significant financial management issues to consider. The model requires costs to be covered at both the sub-county and district levels, which may lead to clear cash flow and financial management challenges. These challenges could potentially hinder the smooth implementation of the model, especially if the necessary financial resources and management structures are not in place.

The model offers several benefits that significantly enhance land registration and governance. It provides improved tenure security for rural landowners, with a particular focus on women and marginalized groups, ensuring their land rights are better protected. By employing participatory and decentralized processes, the model promotes efficient land governance, enabling

communities to play an active role in managing their land resources. Additionally, the approach is both affordable and sustainable, as it leverages local resources and existing structures to reduce costs. Integration with the Uganda National Land Information System (UgNLIS) further strengthens the model, ensuring consistency in land data, safeguarding land rights, and supporting broader national planning initiatives.

The self-financing model serves as a scalable solution for improving land administration in Uganda and other similar contexts, with a focus on equity, transparency, and sustainability.

► Further information

GIZ (2024), Self-Financing model for customary land registration in Uganda, Implementation manual

GIZ (2024), Self-financing model for the scaling of customary land services in Uganda. Policy paper

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