



Good Practice

Global Programme Responsible Land Policy

UGANDA: Registration of Customary Land Adjacent to Environmentally Sensitive Areas

May 2025

Programme and project

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 by *Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH* through the Responsible Land Policy in Uganda (RELAPU) project, and funded by BMZ. Implemented since 2016, the RELAPU project is currently active in the districts of Dokolo (Amwoma, Batta, Agwata, Dokolo and Tubur sub-counties) and Amolatar (Muntu and

Agwingiri sub-counties) with direct project funding, as well as in West Nile region and central Uganda under the Improvement of Land Governance in Uganda (ILGU) project with co-financing from the European Union (EU). 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.

key implementing partners. Finally, RELAPU engages agricultural investors to raise awareness of responsible land policy.

Among others, RELAPU promotes innovative approaches to enhance customary land registration, as customary tenure, which accounts for 80% of all land in Uganda (and 90% in the northern region), remains vastly undocumented.¹ Approximately 18 million parcels of customary land are unregistered. Within the customary land registration approach, registration of traditional land adjacent to environmentally sensitive areas, especially wetlands, represents a specific challenge, as this requires taking natural resource management guidelines into consideration. To tackle this issue, RELAPU has piloted a specific approach for wetland demarcation, through inspection of natural resources and instauration of buffer zones. The objective of this approach is to safeguard environmentally sensitive ecosystems while ensuring compliance with physical planning and environmental management guidelines.



RELAPU's comprehensive approach to enhancing land rights and governance focuses on institutional capacity 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

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.

Starting point

Wetlands, covering approximately 10% of Uganda's total land area, are as essential as forests, arable lands, and water resources. They serve crucial ecological and socio-economic roles. Ecologically, wetlands maintain water tables, prevent erosion, carbon storage, trap sediments, and support biodiversity. Socio-economically, they provide construction materials, craft resources, furniture, hunting and fishing grounds, and areas for cattle grazing, crop cultivation, and domestic water sourcing. Despite their immense value, adjacent communities have historically misperceived wetlands

as “wastelands,” leading to extensive degradation and reclamation.

Recognizing the urgency of wetland conservation, Uganda's government plays a pivotal role. As a signatory to the Ramsar Convention, Uganda is internationally committed to sustainable wetland management. In 1986, administrative guidelines were issued to halt large-scale wetland drainage, prioritizing scientifically and socially harmonious policies. This led to the 1995 National Policy for the Conservation and Management of Wetland

CHALLENGES CAUSED BY UNSUSTAINABLE EXPLOITATION OF WETLANDS

The unsustainable exploitation of wetlands has caused severe challenges, including:

- ▶ **Water loss:** Draining wetlands for farmland reduces water availability critical for plant growth.
- ▶ **Runoff control reduction:** Loss of wetland water flow regulation leads to increased erosion and limits moist areas needed for grazing and fast-growing crops.
- ▶ **Carbon sinks:** Wetlands are known stores of carbon and thus serve a role in the control of greenhouse gas emissions.
- ▶ **Soil deterioration:** Drained wetland soils risk acidification, shrinkage, and decreased agricultural suitability.
- ▶ **Loss of traditional uses:** Conversion to monoculture farming undermines traditional livelihoods like fishing and natural vegetation harvesting.
- ▶ **Restricted ownership:** Cash crop farming often benefits a few investors while eliminating diverse community uses.
- ▶ **Economic inflexibility:** Monocultures limit communities' ability to adapt to changing economic conditions.
- ▶ **Pest risks:** Large-scale monocultures are highly vulnerable to pest infestations, posing challenges for resource-limited developers.
- ▶ **Health concerns:** Increased exposure to stagnant water raises bilharzia risks, straining health resources.



Bululu Sub County leaders off setting a buffer zone in Sanga-Bwire village along Lake Kyoga

Resources, aimed at halting wetland loss and ensuring equitable, sustainable use.

The policy mandates:

- ▶ No drainage unless overriding environmental needs justify it.
- ▶ Sustainable utilization to maintain long-term benefits.
- ▶ Environmentally sound management to prevent broader ecological damage.
- ▶ Equitable benefit distribution.
- ▶ Environmental impact assessments for all wetland activities.

Wetland demarcation is a cost-effective, long-term strategy for systematically restoring and recovering lost ecosystems. It aims to increase the spatial extent of the wetland and its functionality, particularly its natural water retention and drainage capabilities.

Positive changes



A community member planting a boundary marker during the wetland demarcation exercise in Sanga-Bwire village in Bululu Sub County



A sample wetland map showing a wetland boundary of a demarcated wetland

One of the primary objectives of wetland demarcation is to raise awareness among different stakeholders, particularly those living near the wetland and other community members who often engage in encroachment and degradation. Efforts have been made to raise awareness about the potential benefits of wetland restoration through local councils and clan systems, aiming to mobilize actions to address wetland loss and degradation and enhance ecosystem functioning.

In 2020, the leadership of Asuret Sub-county in Soroti District piloted a wetland inspection initiative by engaging the District Environment Officer (DEO) to assess environmentally sensitive areas. This effort aimed to support the processing and issuance of Certificates of Customary Ownership (CCOs) for households located near these areas.

Asuret sub-county successfully carried out an inspection of a 36 km stretch of wetlands in the villages of Apwot, Oregia Ajepet, Adala Opolai, Okunguro, Opelepel and Otatai Central. Over 100 application files whose land are adjacent to wetlands have been processed, and households have acquired CCOs.

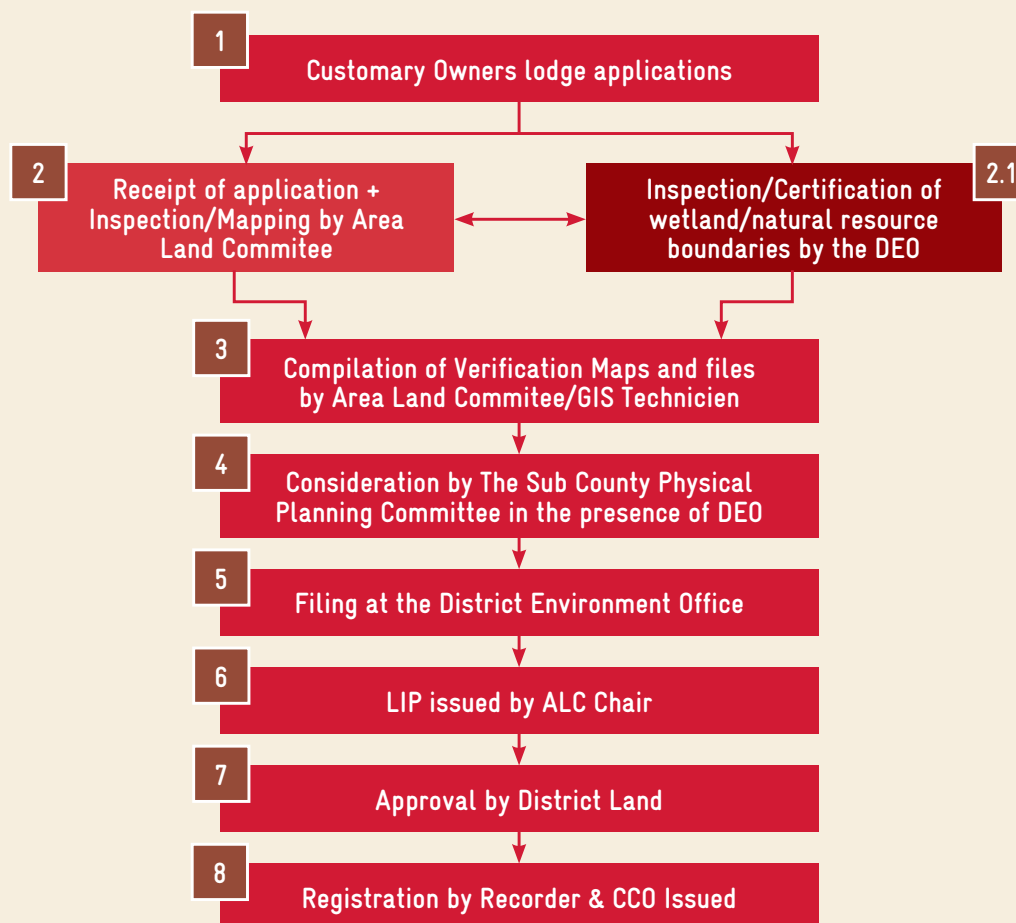
The pilot in Asuret successfully convinced the leadership of both Asuret and Katine sub-counties to incorporate

natural resource inspections into their annual budgets. As a result, a broader range of natural resources—including wetlands—were inspected in Katine, with 80% of the sub-county's wetlands assessed. Prior to this initiative, local leaders had not prioritized wetland protection and restoration.

The natural resource inspection exercise fostered a positive shift in community attitudes, as community members were sensitized to the benefits of protecting natural resources. These included biodiversity conservation, improved household water security, climate regulation, and the preservation of vital habitats.

Regarding costs, the sub-county or the District Environment Office allocated budgeted funds to cover expenses related to the participation of technical staff—such as transportation and safari day allowances for the District Environment Officer. GIZ RELAPU provided technical support by equipping the team with a tablet paired with a GNSS (Global Navigation Satellite System) receiver, enabling the accurate capture of natural resource boundary coordinates and the generation of shapefiles to define the limits of the land parcels to be mapped and certified.

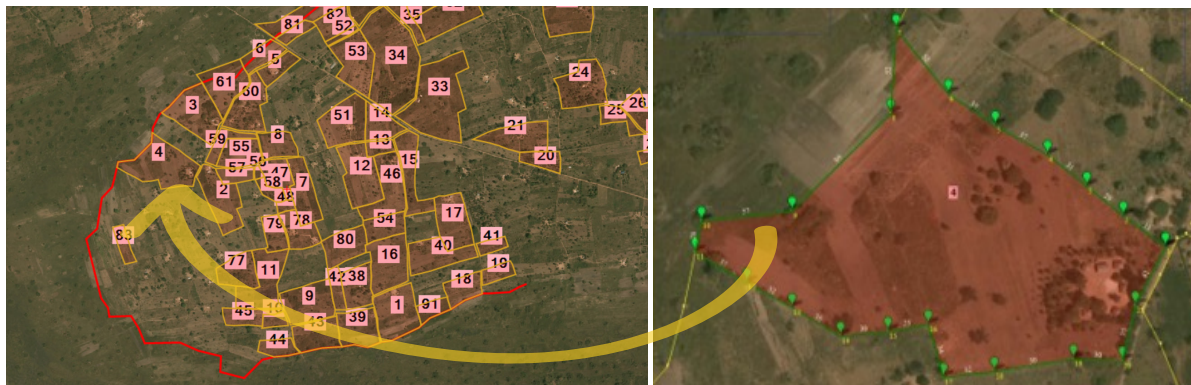
Approach



The process of wetland demarcation or mapping land adjacent to natural resources involves eight systematic steps to ensure clarity, fairness, and adherence to legal frameworks.

The approach starts with **Step 1, where customary landowners lodge applications**. Prior to this, mapping teams undergo training on FFP mapping, relevant policies and legal frameworks, while community members are sensitized on land rights, laws, restrictions and registration procedures. This preparation enables informed decisions at the household level. Landowners opting to document their land pay a fee of 5,000 UGX (about €1.30), complete application forms, and submit them to the Area Land Committee (ALC).

In **Step 2, applications are received, and initial land demarcations are conducted**. The ALC issues a public notice for 14 days and then conducts an inspection whilst planting vegetative boundary markers. These markers are later verified by the District Environment Officer (DEO) to establish ecological boundaries. Step 2.1 involves certification of these boundaries, led by the DEO, with support from local leaders and community representatives. Using advanced tools like Global Navigation Satellite System (GNSS) receivers, boundary coordinates are captured, and attendance lists of all participants are recorded as evidence.



Verification maps of Apwot village in Asuret sub county, Soroti District

Following verification, **Step 3 involves the preparation of detailed maps** by the Area Land Committee (ALC), Geographic Information System (GIS) technicians, and field assistants. Once the boundaries of natural resources have been successfully inspected and verified, the ALC—working with the GIS technician and field team—produces verification maps for land applications adjacent to these resources. These maps clearly delineate ecological boundaries, identify any encroachments, and serve as a key input for further review by the Sub-County Physical Planning Committee.

In **Step 4**, this committee, comprising various sub-county and district officers, **reviews applications to ensure compliance with national environmental standards**. The DEO provides technical guidance to support recommendations for ownership certificate approval.

For records, **Step 5** requires the **sub-county to document all approved applications**, including verified

maps, attendance lists, and ecological boundary maps, to be filed with the DEO.

In **Step 6, Land Inventory Protocols (LIPs) are issued** by the ALC chairperson to landowners. These protocols serve as supplementary documentation verifying customary land ownership, aligned with legal provisions.



Senior Environment officer Soroti district leading Asuret sub county leaders during a wetland demarcation exercise

Step 7 moves the process to the District Land Board (DLB), which **reviews and approves applications** for (CCOs). The DLB, guided by technical staff and sometimes the DEO, ensures all applications protect natural resources.

Finally, in **step 8**, the recorder **registers the approved applications and issues CCOs**. Landowners are notified to collect their certificates at which step they pay an additional certificate issuance fee of 5,000 UGX (about €1.30), completing the formal process of securing their land rights adjacent to natural resources.

Lessons learned



Bululu Sub County leaders off setting a buffer zone in Sanga-Bwire village along Lake Kyoga

The piloting of wetland demarcation in Asuret Sub-County has faced significant challenges. Resistance from individuals cultivating wetlands for personal gain has hindered efforts to enforce environmental safeguards. Many wetland users suspect the government intends to allocate these areas for grazing by “Balalo”

cattle keepers, further fuelling opposition. The lack of permanent boundary markers, such as concrete pillars, has necessitated temporary solutions using natural materials like “Eligoi and Ejumula.”

Insufficient budget allocations have delayed demarcation activities, allowing exploitative practices to persist. Compounding the problem is the lack of political will, as some politicians support farmers exploitation of wetlands for electoral gains. Additionally, community negligence and low awareness of environmental protection laws and related benefits exacerbate wetland degradation.

Several key insights emerged from this pilot initiative:

- ▶ **Dedicated Budgeting:** Sub-counties must include natural resource inspections in their budgets to ensure sustainability. Accredited district environment officers should oversee these activities.
- ▶ **Policy Enforcement:** Timely reprisal actions, such as fines and arrests, are crucial for deterring wetland offenders and curbing degradation.
- ▶ **Community Involvement:** Engaging local leaders and establishing village-level wetland protection committees are effective strategies for safeguarding wetlands.
- ▶ **Digital Solutions:** Employing digital mapping for wetland demarcation ensures cost-effective mapping

and sustainable protection, allowing precise boundary tracing during encroachment disputes.

- ▶ **Land Mapping:** Mapping and documenting land adjacent to wetlands create clear boundaries, reducing encroachment by neighbouring landowners.
- ▶ **Population Pressure:** High population densities and the depletion of arable land drive wetland encroachment. Many families rely on fertile wetland soil due to a lack of alternatives like fertilizers.
- ▶ **Conflict Over Resources:** Increased wetland use by a few individuals has led to conflicts, as communal resources such as wells, grazing lands and fishing grounds are displaced by private agricultural activities.

Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive approach that integrates community education, effective enforcement, and sustainable resource management to balance local needs with environmental protection. Wetland demarcation stands out as a practical and effective measure, offering a tangible solution to these issues through clear boundary setting and responsible land use planning.

Impressum

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