PROJECT

LAND-AT-SCALE IRAQ

LAND, DATA & DIGNITY: Architectures for Sustainable Peace Through Land Governance



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March 2026

Photo credit: *Field data collection, Sinjar (Ninewa), Iraq*

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INTRODUCTION

In the aftermath of protracted conflict, rebuilding a nation demands more than reconstructing roads, schools, and homes. It requires restoring trust in institutions and recognizing citizens' most fundamental asset: their relationship to land. In post-conflict Iraq, land insecurity has operated as a structural driver of instability, with over five million people displaced and decades of land records destroyed, manipulated, or rendered inaccessible.

The LAND-at-scale (LAS) Iraq programme, implemented by UN-Habitat and funded by the Government of the Netherlands, offers an important example of stabilization efforts through land governance reform.

Land, Data, and Dignity are three terms often used in policy discussions and institutional reform, yet they embody a much deeper plurality of meanings, symbols, stories, and history. Together, they describe a structural reality at the heart of post-conflict recovery: the relationship between people and the place they call home.

Land is not merely soil or boundaries on a map. It is memory, identity, livelihood, and belonging. When conflict uproots families or erases their rights, what is lost is not only property — it is recognition. To be displaced, or to return without proof of tenure, is often to feel invisible.

Data plays a crucial role in preventing that invisibility. When land relations are documented — through participatory mapping, testimonies, verified records, and institutional integration — lived realities become acknowledged facts. Securing tenure is not only about occupying space; it is about ensuring that the relationship between a person and their land is recorded, protected, and progressively strengthened.

From that recognition comes **Dignity** — a dignified human existence grounded in the autonomy, privacy, and security that come from recognizing people's rights to land and their entitlement to use and benefit from it. As one returnee expressed:

"Now, by accessing these Occupancy Certificates, our family's tenure is secured. This has helped restore our dignity as a people."

Peace is built through many paths. Land governance alone does not create stability. However, experience from LAS Iraq suggests that when land is secured, when rights are documented, and when people see their names formally recognized, a significant and essential foundation for sustainable peace begins to take shape.

The LAS Iraq effort demonstrates that registering property rights is not merely a technical mapping exercise. **Formalizing the relationship between people and land can become an act of nation-building.** It *defines belonging, restores citizenship, and shapes the institutional future that communities seek to rebuild.*

This brief reflects on the practical knowledge gained through the intervention and explains how the Social Tenure Domain Model (STDM) helped connect informal land realities with the formal registration system. By documenting who lives where, how, and with what evidence — through participatory processes and institutional validation — the programme supported families in moving from uncertainty toward greater tenure security.

The transition from Certificates of Occupancy (COs) into full Title Deeds is gradual, but it represents a decisive and foundational step. It requires continued support, legal alignment, and institutional commitment so that progress made becomes permanent. In fragile contexts, this is not only an administrative process; it contributes to reducing disputes, strengthening trust in public institutions, and reinforcing stability. Continued support is therefore essential to ensure that temporary security evolves into full and durable rights.

LAND AS THE FOUNDATION OF STABILITY

In fragile and post-conflict settings, land governance is not a peripheral administrative concern. It is closely linked to stability, economic recovery, and state legitimacy. For many Iraqis, land is not simply an asset — it is proof of belonging within the nation's social and legal order. Drawing on the tenure security framework, recovering land rights for displaced populations extends beyond formal title alone; it restores recognition, belonging, and legal identity — foundational elements of dignity. Documenting occupancy and progressively securing full title helps protect fundamental rights and reduces the risk of arbitrary deprivation of property or possession (Unruh & Williams, 2013).



Delivery of Occupancy Certificates during the visit of the Ambassador of the Netherlands, Sinjar (Ninewa), Iraq

Iraq's land administration system was severely undermined by decades of conflict, including the destruction caused by ISIL, where more than 6,000 homes were destroyed in Sinjar (Ninewa), and earlier demographic manipulation policies such as forced "Arabization" (Diab, 2024). The Ba'ath-era policies of the 1970s — which confiscated land from minorities such as the Yazidis — remain an underlying structural driver of land grievances. When displaced families returned to areas like Sinjar and Ninewa, they encountered not only destroyed homes but erased evidence — burned registries, lost deeds, and manipulated records (Diab, 2024).

As a result, many IDPs lacked any means to prove tenure. Without it

- Returns remain fragile: Without proof of tenure, displaced families face insecurity upon return.
- Investment stalls: The absence of legal certainty discourages reconstruction and economic recovery.
- Disputes intensify: Ambiguity over land rights fuels and escalates local conflicts

In this way, land insecurity functioned as a structural risk factor for renewed instability.

Land, Data, and Dignity is therefore not simply a play on words framing this brief. It reflects three interconnected dimensions observed throughout implementation: secure tenure, human recognition, and institutional continuity. While sustainable peace depends on multiple political, social, and economic pathways, strengthening land governance emerged as a meaningful contribution within that broader landscape. At its core lies a straightforward lesson: when people's relationship to land is recognized, protected, and transparently managed, the foundations for stability are reinforced.

STRUCTURAL CONTEXT: FRAGMENTATION AND DISPOSSESSION

Iraq's land sector faces interlocking challenges:

Institutional Fragmentation

Overlapping mandates between the Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of Agriculture, and local authorities have created inefficiencies and jurisdictional ambiguity. This has led to delays and confusion regarding responsibilities. For communities, this meant uncertainty, repeated visits to different offices, and slower resolution of their claims. For the project, it required constant coordination and alignment to avoid duplication and institutional friction. If not addressed, this type of ambiguity risks weakening public trust in the system.

Destruction of Records

Reliance on paper registries left the system vulnerable. Conflict destroyed or looted up to 30% of duplicated records in some regions, placing millions in documentary limbo.

Informal Land Markets

Registration procedures averaging 51 days pushed many transactions outside formal channels, creating parallel systems that lack legal protection.

Historical Grievances

Confiscation of minority lands during the 1970s, particularly affecting Yazidi communities, created unresolved claims that resurfaced after displacement.

With approximately 1.5 million internally displaced persons and over 6,000 homes destroyed in key areas, conventional cadastral approaches proved inadequate. What was required was not simply digitization, but a shift in logic — one capable of recognizing lived land realities before imposing formal legal categories.

A Three-Pillar Perspective on LAS Iraq: Land, Data, and Dignity

The LAS Iraq programme provides a unique lens to examine a large-scale land intervention through three interdependent and equally powerful pillars that together shape the project's impact.

LAND – Secure Tenure and Progressive Formalization

Rather than attempting immediate full titling in a fragile registry environment, the programme documented de facto tenure relationships and issued Certificates of Occupancy as an incremental step toward permanent Title Deeds. This approach — already applied by UN-Habitat in Iraq since 2017 — has continued to expand through successive phases under the LAND-at-scale programme to strengthen tenure security for displaced and returning populations up to the present. It recognizes that in fragile contexts, waiting for full cadastral reconstruction can leave families unprotected for years.



3rd session of the Policy Dialogue series with NGOs, Erbil, Iraq1

The COs provided documented evidence of occupancy, reduced the risk of eviction, and enabled households to access assistance and begin rebuilding. They were recognized by local, district, and federal authorities. At the same time, they created a structured pathway toward eventual registration and full Title Deeds, aligning community-validated data with formal legal processes as institutional capacity and legal alignment progressed.

This approach has proven effective for several key reasons:

• **Reduced immediate disputes on the ground:** In several return areas, neighboring families had overlapping claims due to lost or destroyed records. Through participatory mapping and public validation sessions, boundaries were jointly reviewed and agreed upon before Certificates of Occupancy were issued. What could have evolved into court cases or broader community conflict was resolved early through documented recognition, reducing disputes at their source.

• **Encouraged rebuilding and willingness to return:** Many displaced families were hesitant to invest in reconstruction without proof of tenure. After receiving COs, households began repairing homes, applying for compensation, reconnecting utilities, and reopening small businesses, as the certificate provided sufficient legal reassurance to justify investing savings and accessing assistance programmes.

• **Allowed institutional capacity to strengthen gradually:** Instead of overwhelming land registries with complex full-title applications in a fragile environment, the incremental COs approach enabled authorities to manage cases progressively. This allowed registry staff to build technical skills, improve digital workflows, and align legal procedures step by step before transitioning cases toward full Title Deeds.

The approach aligned with "fit-for-purpose" land administration principles tailored to fragile contexts because it adapted to the institutional reality on the ground. Instead of pursuing complex and costly full titling from the outset, it prioritized practical tenure security through Certificates of Occupancy — providing immediate protection while systems matured. The approach was flexible, affordable, and scalable, and allowed institutions to strengthen gradually rather than be overwhelmed. In fragile contexts, delivering "good enough" security early is often more effective than waiting for a perfect system.

DATA – INSTITUTIONAL SUSTAINABILITY

Digitalization was not treated as a technological shortcut. Workflows based on the Social Tenure Domain Model (STDM) were embedded within participatory processes together with communities and national institutions.

As an ISO 19152–aligned model (Land Administration Domain Model), STDM ensures scalability, interoperability, and structured integration with existing or future formal registry systems. This prevented the system from remaining a temporary pilot and ensured long-term institutional continuity.



2nd session of the Policy Dialogue Public Sector - Series at the Ministry of Justice, Baghdad, Iraq

Digital Innovation: STDM as a Bridge Between Reality and Law

Traditional cadastral systems recognize only formal ownership. STDM recognizes a **continuum of land rights**, including:

- Occupancy
- Customary claims
- Collective rights
- Seasonal use

It further combines technical documentation with community validation and close coordination with national authorities, ensuring that local recognition can gradually translate into legal standing. Key allies included local leaders and the Ministry of Justice. Major challenges — such as destroyed records, overlapping mandates, and mistrust after conflict — were addressed through continuous dialogue and an incremental approach that prioritized immediate tenure security while institutions strengthened over time.

This steady process has led to concrete progress in documenting land relationships, issuing Occupancy Certificates, and advancing compensation cases, contributing to greater stability and trust.

The digitalization effort — working on data as one interrelated pillar alongside land and dignity — allowed the programme to achieve significant outcomes, including:

- A meaningful and inclusive participatory STDM mapping process led by UNHABITAT, in which 70% of the work was done by youth and community members.
- 45% female participation in field teams.
- Integration of satellite imagery, identity records, oral testimonies, and supplementary documentary or community-based evidence to substantiate tenure and ownership claims.
- Public validation sessions prior to certification.

By 2026, results included:

- Thousands of tenure relationships documented.
- 1,000+ registered HLP claims and Occupancy Certificates issued.
- 600+ compensation cases processed.

These outcomes represent not merely administrative outputs but a measurable reduction in uncertainty — a key conflict driver in post-war settings.

DIGNITY – INCLUSIVE RECOGNITION

Land governance reform addressed historical exclusion by ensuring women, Yazidis, and returnees were visibly recognized in documentation.

Key measures included:

- Joint registration of spouses and all household members.
- Inclusion of women's names on certificates.
- Female participation in field teams and outreach sessions.
- Community validation processes.

Dignity was operationalized through visibility within official records. In this context, *dignity refers to the recognition of individuals as legitimate rights-holders by both their community and the state.*

In post-conflict settings, war and displacement do not only destroy houses; they often remove people from official records, leaving them invisible in the eyes of institutions and without legal protection. Making dignity visible through official records means ensuring that a person's link to their land is formally documented and recognized. When someone's name appears in a registry — whether through a Certificate of Occupancy or a Title Deed — it is more than paperwork. It means the state acknowledges their rights, reduces the risk of eviction, and allows them to access compensation and services. In this way, documentation becomes a practical means of restoring dignity by connecting legal recognition with security, belonging, and stability.

APPLIED KNOWLEDGE: WHAT WORKED AND WHY

COMMUNITY VALIDATION AS CONFLICT PREVENTION

Local Committees facilitated structured public validation sessions in which tenure claims were presented, reviewed, and, where necessary, mediated at the community level. This bottom-up process was progressively institutionalized through endorsement by Local Authorities, followed by District Authorities, and ultimately formal recognition at the Federal level. The recognition of Occupancy Certificates therefore evolved through a sequenced governance pathway — from community validation to subnational approval and finally federal acknowledgment — ensuring that legal legitimacy was built from the ground upward.

This sequenced pathway did more than formalize property claims; it rebuilt trust and strengthened local capacity. Because recognition moved from community level to district and federal endorsement, legitimacy was built step by step rather than imposed. At the same time, local committees and community members gained practical experience in land governance, developing skills that can continue to serve the sector beyond the project. In fragile contexts, this gradual alignment between social validation and formal recognition reinforces trust, professional capacity, and long-term sustainability.

Key impact points:

• **Enhanced social legitimacy:** Claims validated openly at community level were more widely accepted, increasing trust in both the process and the institutions involved.

• **Reduced litigation burdens:** Early mediation at local level resolved 95% of disputes before they reached courts, easing pressure on already fragile judicial systems.

• **Prevented escalation of local conflicts:** Many disputes were identified and resolved in the field or during public sessions before certificates were issued, preventing them from moving into formal litigation or becoming prolonged conflicts.

Participation became governance infrastructure. Through structured validation sessions and local committees, community engagement was not treated as consultation but as part of the decision-making architecture. By embedding dialogue, mediation, and collective verification into formal procedures, participation evolved into a functional layer of governance that strengthened legitimacy, accountability, and long-term institutional trust.

LEGAL ALIGNMENT: THE 2022 DECREE

On December 27, 2022, Iraq's Council of Ministers recognized STDM-based Occupancy Certificates as legal evidence for Yazidi HLP rights. This decision was particularly significant after nearly 47 years of discrimination and dispossession linked to past policies. The recognition marked a turning point: community-documented tenure could now serve as admissible legal evidence, opening a pathway toward formal rights and restitution.

This milestone was the result of sustained engagement and technical support by UN-Habitat over several years, further strengthened in its most recent phase through the LAS programme. While this achievement represents a decisive step forward, continuing the process of converting Occupancy Certificates into full Title Deeds remains fundamental for long-term sustainability. Legal alignment and institutional commitment are essential to consolidate the progress achieved. Transitioning to secure property titles provides stronger tenure protection, reduces future disputes, and fully integrates beneficiaries into the formal land administration system. Advancing toward full titling ensures that the progress made becomes durable and legally robust.

This milestone illustrates how evidence generated through participatory, community-based processes can influence national policy and strengthen the rule of law. Through sustained policy dialogue, legal analysis, and technical accompaniment under UN-Habitat and the LAS programme, field-level documentation was progressively connected to institutional reform — demonstrating how operational work on the ground can translate into structural change at the federal level.

This decree transformed technical documentation into enforceable rights.

Knowledge insight:

This lesson is derived not only from programme implementation but also from the combined experience of those responsible for designing and implementing LAS — namely RVO and UN-Habitat. Technical reform must converge with legal reform to achieve permanence. The programme demonstrated that technical reform alone is insufficient. Although digital tools and documentation systems delivered tangible results, without formal legal recognition their impact would have remained fragile and temporary. Sustainable outcomes depend on aligning technical innovation with robust legal frameworks and sustained institutional commitment.

INCREMENTAL FORMALIZATION

The phased approach from Occupancy Certificates to Title Deeds:

- Reduced administrative overload.
- Built registry capacity gradually.
- Encouraged early investment in reconstruction.

This context-sensitive strategy proved more resilient than immediate full titling.

STRUCTURAL GENDER INCLUSION

Joint registration and procedural safeguards embedded gender equity within administrative practice, rather than relying solely on awareness campaigns. This institutionalized inclusion and strengthened women's economic security.



Signing of an Occupancy Certificate by a Yazidi woman during a special session held on International Women's Day

Gender inclusion in land administration goes beyond participation; it ensures that women are formally recognized as rights holders. The project aimed to achieve parity among the beneficiaries, reaching 49.12% women and 50.88 % men**.** Joint registration works because it legally records both spouses as co-owners, strengthening women's tenure security, increasing their bargaining power within the household, and protecting them against dispossession in cases of divorce, separation, or widowhood.

For example, in several land formalization initiatives, women included in joint land titles reported greater involvement in household decisions and improved access to credit, as the land certificate bearing their name provided formal proof of ownership. In one case, a widow who held joint title was able to retain her land and continue farming independently, securing income for her children — something that would have been significantly more difficult without formal recognition of her rights.

PEACE THROUGH PROCEDURE

Peacebuilding is often framed politically. Yet durable peace also depends on administrative legitimacy. Lasting peace depends on how public institutions function in people's daily lives. When citizens can register property, resolve disputes, or access services in a fair and transparent way, their trust in the state grows — often more than through political agreements alone.

Research from the OECD (*States of Fragility*) and the World Bank (*World Development Reports* 2011 and 2017) shows that when public administration is perceived as fair and effective, state legitimacy increases and the risk of renewed conflict decreases. UNDP studies on rule of law also find that when land and property rights are formally and transparently documented, disputes tend to decline and confidence in institutions rises.

In short, legitimacy is built not only through elections or peace agreements, but through consistent and fair administrative practice. That is what ultimately helps sustain long-term stability.

Land governance reform contributes to preventive peacebuilding by:

• **Reducing fears:** Research on tenure security shows that documented land rights reduce fear of eviction and uncertainty, key drivers of instability in post-conflict settings (Alhola & Gwaindepi, 2024; UN-Habitat/GLTN, 2014; Prindex, 2019; World Bank, 2011, 2017).

• **Enabling economic recovery:** Studies on property rights and development consistently demonstrate that secure tenure increases investment in housing, land improvement, and small businesses, facilitating local economic recovery.

• **Strengthening trust in institutions:** Governance and rule-of-law research highlights that when institutions deliver predictable and fair administrative services — such as land registration — public trust and perceived state legitimacy increase.

• **Mitigating vulnerability:** Evidence from fragility and conflict research indicates that unresolved land claims and legal insecurity heighten vulnerability to exploitation, displacement, and recruitment by armed actors, whereas documented rights reduce these risks.

When citizens see their names formally recognized in state records, the social contract begins to be reconsidered.

TRANSFERABLE PRINCIPLES FOR FRAGILE CONTEXTS

Through a series of workshops and structured reflections with the Knowledge Management (KM) team, practical lessons were consolidated into a set of guiding principles. Implementation in Iraq — including both successes and bottlenecks — demonstrated that sustainable land reform depends not only on technical tools, but also on institutional co-ownership, incremental recognition, legal backing of data, structured dialogue, and the preventive use of information to manage disputes before escalation.

Based on this experience, the Iraq case offers adaptable principles:

INSTITUTIONAL ANCHORING FROM DAY ONE

Reform initiatives must be co-owned by national authorities from the outset. Sustainable land governance reform requires the active engagement of the Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of Migration and Displacement, and the Real Estate Registration Directorates, operating in coordination across national, regional, and local levels.

Practical implementation experience showed that early coordination gaps and overlapping mandates created delays and uncertainty. Once these institutions began formally coordinating, endorsing the process, and engaging in structured policy dialogues, implementation became more predictable, legally sound, and operationally effective. This provided concrete evidence that structured co-ownership is essential for sustainable reform.

RECOGNITION BEFORE FORMALIZATION

Provide incremental security while formal systems evolve. In fragile contexts, immediate full title is often unrealistic. Recognizing de facto tenure through intermediate instruments reduces disputes, supports return, and builds confidence while institutional capacity is strengthened.

Legal Meaning for Data

Documentation must carry legal equivalence. Digital records, certificates, and databases must be explicitly recognized within the legal framework to ensure enforceability, evidentiary validity, and long-term sustainability.

The formal recognition of STDM-based Occupancy Certificates as legal evidence demonstrates that digital documentation can achieve legal standing when supported by policy dialogue and institutional endorsement. While full integration into the national registry remains ongoing, continued legal alignment and system interoperability are essential to ensure digital records carry equal evidentiary value.

Dialogue as Governance Infrastructure

Permanent multi-stakeholder platforms sustain reform momentum. Structured policy dialogue between ministries, technical agencies, and community representatives prevents fragmentation, builds consensus, and allows adaptive legal and procedural refinement.



Session of the Policy Dialogue Series at the Ministry of Justice, Baghdad, Iraq

Data as an Early-Warning Mechanism

Digital land systems can identify overlapping claims before escalation. Structured, georeferenced data enables early detection of tenure conflicts, allowing mediation and administrative intervention before disputes evolve into broader instability.

Together, these principles reposition land governance as stabilization architecture rather than merely technical reform.

Scalability and Sustainability

Sustainability means moving from a time-bound project to lasting public policy. Projects can demonstrate what works, but long-term impact requires that systems and procedures be fully integrated into national laws and institutions. This was not only a general development principle; it was also explicitly discussed in project policy dialogues.

Going forward, priorities include:

- Registry interoperability
- National digital integration

- Minority safeguards
- Continuous gender-responsive reform
- Institutionalized policy dialogue

Scalability depends not only on technology, but also on political will, institutional capacity, and financial sustainability. Governments must take ownership, allocate national budget resources, and continue building staff capacity. Reforms should be integrated into existing systems rather than run in parallel. Scaling up should be gradual and embedded in national policy to guarantee long-term sustainability.

As one stakeholder noted:

"We now have the tools, the legal basis, and the trust. Sustainability depends on maintaining alignment."
— Mr. Ahmed Luaebi, Director General of Judicial Relations

Conclusion: Good Land Governance as a Significant Architecture for Peace

Land governance in fragile contexts is not a secondary development issue — it is a stabilization strategy. In Iraq, integrating **Land, Data, and Dignity** has helped:

Document previously invisible tenure relationships.

- Reduce compensation backlogs.
- Strengthen minority rights.
- Institutionalize digital reform.
- Restore pathways toward legal recognition.

The transition from Occupancy Certificates to Title Deeds represents more than administrative progress. It marks the gradual restoration of the social contract.

Peace is not built solely in political negotiations. It is built when institutions recognize their citizens — by name, by right, and by land.

Reconstruction is not complete when walls are rebuilt. It is complete when the right to belong is documented, protected, and sustained.

The LAS Iraq programme demonstrates that sustainable peace in post-conflict settings depends not only on technical solutions, but on the alignment of land governance with legal recognition, institutional capacity, and social legitimacy. By securing tenure through participatory mapping, Occupancy Certificates, and incremental formalization, the programme restored dignity, reduced disputes, and strengthened trust in institutions. Key principles — early institutional co-ownership, recognition before full formalization, legal equivalence of data, structured dialogue, and the use of digital systems as early-warning mechanisms — offer a scalable model for fragile contexts. Ultimately, when people's relationships to land are recognized, protected, and documented, the foundations for long-term stability, inclusion, and sustainable peace are reinforced.

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Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands



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Quote:

This publication was developed as part of the LAND-at-scale programme, funded by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and managed by the Netherlands Enterprise Agency (RVO). The views presented in this document are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent those of the Dutch government.

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