Local land use conventions

With land use conventions, local communities enshrine rules and rights on land use – for more social justice and sustainability.

Background

How land areas are used and managed fairly and sustainably can be determined by local communities in land use conventions. The rules and agreements set out in these conventions state, for example, who is allowed to cultivate or graze specific areas of land and when, how land is divided and how communal or private rights of use are structured. In rural regions in particular, where land forms the basis of local livelihoods and national legislation sometimes has little effect, such agreements create reliability, avoid conflicts and protect against overexploitation of soil.

Local land use conventions are particularly relevant where the expansion and commercialisation of settlements, infrastructure and agriculture threaten traditionally used areas. The conventions make it possible to regulate conflicts of use – for example between agriculture, pasture and agroforestry, nature conservation and settlement expansion – at the local level. They also help to ensure that the community cultivates the land sustainably, maintains soil fertility and passes on local knowledge of sustainable land management.

However, the coexistence of formal and informal land rights often means that local agreements are not legally recognised or are superseded by formal property titles.

Land-use conflicts arise when external actors such as investors or public authorities pursue different usage interests than the local community or government decisions contradict tradition-based rights.

In addition, power imbalances within communities and a lack of participation by marginalised groups can lead to women, newcomers or young people being systematically excluded from decision-making processes or the acquisition of land rights. Social and economic changes, such as emigration or demographic shifts, can also weaken established local land use rules and mechanisms.

Therefore, local use conventions are even more important for the achievement of several Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). They strengthen SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure) by creating a stable, locally adapted framework for sustainable development. They also promote the implementation of SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions) by strengthening local decision-making processes, preventing conflict and increasing the legitimacy of land use regulations. Finally, they contribute to the achievement of SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals) by enabling or promoting cooperation between state and civil society actors.



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Solutions from development cooperation

Development cooperation can strengthen local land use conventions by promoting the documentation and recognition of local agreements. Such formalisation in conventions and their integration into municipal development plans make local agreements more visible and strengthen their political and legal significance. It is crucial to promote participatory decision-making processes that include all relevant groups, particularly marginalised groups such as women.

Development cooperation can increase local resilience and support the implementation of environmental and economic goals if it intervenes with modern, sustainable management models such as agroforestry and solidarity-based or regenerative agriculture. Because development cooperation has mechanisms and access to public authorities and the legislature, it can help to integrate traditional local conventions into national legal frameworks and bring them into line with state-recognised land rights and development goals. It can thus contribute to long-term legal certainty.

Promoting knowledge-sharing and local innovation is also an effective tool for development cooperation to build capacity in the target countries. Training courses and inter-community dialogue on topics such as sustainable land management, conflict management or resource conservation strengthen the adaptability and future viability of local systems. Finally, development cooperation can support the establishment of local structures for conflict mediation and monitoring, thus helping to ensure that land use conflicts are resolved at an early stage and that conventions are adhered to and further developed.

Local land use conventions –
supported by participation and clear rules –
help to ensure the
conservation of natural resources and
constructively resolve or
prevent conflicts.





Niger: Managing resources sustainably with local land use conventions

In Niger, especially in regions such as Egalagh, climatic change, increasing land use pressure and the encroachment of agriculture on traditional pastureland led to more frequent conflicts between arable farmers and pastoralists. The local land commission (*Commission foncière de base*, CoFoB) in Egalagh therefore launched a participatory process to develop a local land use convention, which included extensive awareness-raising activities and involved all relevant social groups.

In this way, the CoFoB wanted to ensure the fair and sustainable use of natural resources in the region and reduce social tensions. The Global Programme Responsible Land Policy of the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH supported the CoFoB by providing it with technical equipment, conducting training courses and strengthening the use of legal instruments. Based on jointly developed criteria, the area was divided into clearly defined use zones: 862 hectares were allocated to livestock farming and 180 hectares to agriculture. In addition, transit corridors have been created for the free movement of people and animals. The area, which used to be exclusively pastureland, has been divided according to the needs of the different users. Anyone who declares a need is entitled to two hectares of land in the territory of Egalagh. This applies to both locals and other interested parties and all rights of use were secured by official land transaction deeds. This has reduced land grabbing by wealthier owners, as well as land speculation.

The convention reduced land conflicts and strengthened social cohesion in the region. The environmental protection measures introduced under the convention include obtaining permits for pruning trees and using the wood from dead hedges as fuel instead of healthy trees. Alongside the environmental improvements, conflicts over resources are also decreasing, which supports the development of trade, such as bartering of milk or grain. Social cohesion between farmers and pastoralists is promoted through new economic and social ties, as well as mutual acceptance and shared interests in conflict-free use of resources.



Benin: Land use conventions protect shea trees

Shea trees (*Vitellaria paradoxa*) are a key source of income for many rural households in northern Benin, especially for women. However, the expansion of agricultural land, fires, extensive deforestation and climate change pose a major threat to this valuable resource.

Since 2016, GIZ's Global Programmes ‚Promotion of Agriculture' and ‚Responsible Land Policy' have been supporting local communities in protecting shea trees. Local land use conventions regulate the sustainable management, care and protection of the shea plantations. The starting point was to identify suitable areas with a minimum size of about 20 hectares and a sufficient density of shea trees (at least 25 trees per hectare). These areas were surveyed with GPS, provided with boundary markings and information boards, and their use was then legally secured through local rules enacted by village chiefs. With formal recognition by the municipal council and the prefecture, the areas have since been placed under official protection.

A local committee manages the areas and coordinates activities such as shea fruit collection, controlled grazing, beekeeping and deadwood collection, while prohibiting farming, slash-and-burn and logging. Income generated is reinvested in the upkeep of the protected areas.

Between 2016 and 2021, nine shea areas of about 25 hectares in the Borgou department were placed under protection under local conventions. As a result, there were significantly fewer resource conflicts, the local community took on more responsibility and the municipal administrations, traditional authorities, user groups and external partners coordinated their activities.

The initiatives are also having an economic impact: the investment required to implement the conventions averaged around 1,000 euros in each case, and a sum of around 800 euros per year was estimated for the maintenance and monitoring of the areas. By specifically promoting economic activities such as beekeeping, part of these costs will be borne by the communities themselves in the long term, contributing to the sustainability and scalability of the approach.

Results of GIZ's Global Programme Responsible Land Policy (GPRLP) (2016–2026)

Communal land in Benin has been upgraded through the implementation of community and individual land use contracts. A total of

2,106 Community Local Use Agreements for Livestock Corridors

(Convention Locale-Couloir de Passage – CL-CP)

and **2,740 Community Use Agreements for Shea Harvest**

(Convention Locale-Karité – CL-K)

were concluded.

Benin's approach is **spreading beyond national borders.**

In neighbouring Burkina Faso, nine collective land use agreements have been drawn up.

In Niger,

eight new land use agreements

have been concluded between the user groups, including two rehabilitated international transhumance corridors that have been secured with concrete pillars, two corridors for passage between villages, and four village grazing areas whose integrity is now secure.

Key messages

1 Local land use conventions are key building blocks for sustainable land use and for balancing land-related interests in rural areas.

2 They regulate access, use and maintenance of land in a way which conserves resources for future generations and strengthens local identity and social cohesion.

3 The effectiveness of local land use conventions is threatened by external interference, lack of legal recognition, and internal power imbalances.

„Since the local land use convention came into force, I am rarely **needed to resolve conflicts** – I used to have to be involved all the time."

Member of the Land Commission (CoFoB)







Recommendations for development cooperation

1. Use local land use conventions as a resource: Local agreements can help protect natural resources, secure land rights, promote income and strengthen social cohesion.

2. Recognise and integrate informal arrangements: Participatory processes should be used to record and document informal agreements and integrate them into rural development projects.

3. Build participatory governance structures: It is important to create structures that include all population groups – especially marginalised groups.

4. Promote integration into formal legal frameworks: Local land use conventions should be systematically embedded in national legal systems in order to create legal certainty.

5. Strengthen capacities for resource management: Both the community and public authorities need support to manage natural resources sustainably.

6. Use technologies sensitively: Modern digital tools can support the continued existence of local knowledge but should be used in a context-sensitive manner.

7. Address external threats at an early stage: Development cooperation should identify threats to local agreements at an early stage and promote appropriate countermeasures.

8. Support sustainable land use models: Approaches such as agroforestry contribute to long-term food security and safeguard ecosystems and should be specifically promoted.

9. Expand conflict management and mediation: Capacities for the peaceful resolution of disputes must be strengthened in order to stabilise local structures.

10. Establish links with higher-level legal systems: It is necessary to build bridges between local conventions, national legal frameworks and innovative approaches.





Learn more

FAO (2012): Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests in the Context of National Food Security (VGGT)

Forest Peoples Programme (2021): Tenure Options – Toward the Recognition of Customary and Local Community Rights to Land and Forest

IIED: Local Land Use Agreements and Sustainable Resource Management

Land Portal: Customary Land Rights

UN Habitat (2019): Customary Land Tenure Security: Tools and Approaches in Sub-Saharan Africa (a synthesis report)

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