

Resolving land conflicts constructively and sustainably

Only if conflicts over land are avoided or resolved non-violently can the land be used sustainably for greater food security.

Background

In land conflicts, there is disagreement about who has access to the land and its resources such as water, who is allowed to use it and how, and who controls it. Land conflicts may involve individuals or groups such as local or ethnic communities and may relate to a few square centimetres of land along a property line or many hectares of land.

The causes of 56 per cent of all violent conflicts worldwide lie in disputes over land, especially in the Global South. In many cases, the regulatory framework required to avoid, contain and resolve conflicts non-violently is absent.

The prevention and non-violent resolution of land conflicts form part of United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 16 to promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, to provide access to justice for all and to build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels. In addition, land conflicts influence the achievement of SDG 2 (Zero Hunger), SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) and SDG 15 (Life on Land).

Causes of land conflicts

Since land fulfils many different functions, the interests and needs of the parties to the conflict are correspondingly diverse. Land can be seen as an economic resource, a factor of production or an object of speculation, an ecological resource or carbon sink, a livelihood base, a cultural reference point or a homeland. In some cases, these interests also include access to historical, religious or other places of importance to local people and hence to the preservation of identity and community.

As well as considering these diverse interests and the needs and concerns of the parties and others affected by the conflict, solutions to land conflicts must take into account the underlying causes, as they can exacerbate the scarcity of land. These causes can include population growth, climate change, extreme natural events, armed conflicts and the associated displacement and migration, as well as capitalist excesses, such as aggressive land speculation and land grabbing.

Political and legal factors influence conflict resolution

Poor political conditions may worsen land conflicts, but they cannot trigger them. These conditions may include inadequate or absent land use planning, a lack of participation by stakeholders or civil society in processes for the recognition of land rights, and inadequate safeguarding of land rights, for example in the form of written documentation, land rights certificates, land registers and cadastres. Responsible land management and transparency with regard to land use at all levels are therefore essential for avoiding land conflicts.

In addition, sustainable and just resolution of conflicts is often hampered by the fact that not all parties to the conflict have equal access to neutral conflict resolution mechanisms, which may be hard to reach, too expensive or otherwise inaccessible. This may be the case, if those affected cannot read and write or employees in the responsible authorities are overworked, overwhelmed, biased or corrupt.

In order to resolve land conflicts, new conflict resolution structures must be built, or existing structures must be strengthened through local approaches so that they are easily accessible, inclusive, independent and legally compliant.



Published by

giz Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH

Solutions from development cooperation

Prevention: The Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH supports the prevention of land conflicts in its partner countries, for example by:

- promoting the documentation or registration of land rights in Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Laos, Madagascar, Niger, Senegal, Uganda and Ethiopia,

- strengthening women's land rights in these countries,

- in Madagascar, supporting the integration of land titles under modern state law and land ownership certificates under traditional law into a digital system,

- contributing to the participatory clarification of land use types and access rights within the framework of local land use agreements such as the Local Land Charter (charte foncière locale) in Burkina Faso, in particular between farmers and pastoralists, and

- supporting the establishment of multi-stakeholder forums in Ethiopia to prevent or resolve conflicts between local communities and external investors. Here, too, the focus is on participation and dialogue.

Vulnerable groups
and weaker parties to the conflict in
asymmetrical land conflicts
need support so that they
can assert their rights.

Conflict management: To resolve land conflicts, GIZ strengthens land management institutions by:

- analysing and evaluating individual conflict resolution mechanisms and their interaction, including with the help of scorecards, in order to determine the level of support for these mechanisms,

- strengthening existing conflict resolution mechanisms, for example through training and the expansion of existing bodies to include disadvantaged groups such as women, young people or pastoralists in Burkina Faso, Niger, Uganda and Ethiopia,

- establishing additional conflict resolution mechanisms, some of which are already provided for by law but have not yet been implemented, in order to close gaps in the institutional framework,

- supporting out-of-court alternative dispute resolution (ADR) mechanisms, as in Uganda, in which the parties to the conflict negotiate solutions themselves with the help of a neutral mediator within the framework of structured negotiation processes,

- enabling vulnerable groups or weaker parties in asymmetric conflicts to receive legal assistance and strengthen their legal position, and

- supporting the documentation and monitoring of land conflicts in Laos using digital technologies. Drones are used to record the status and extent of land conflicts. This data serves as the basis for conflict resolution. In addition, the current status of land conflict resolution is monitored via smartphone apps.



Burkina Faso: Municipalities negotiate local land use agreements

In Burkina Faso, as in many places in rural sub-Saharan Africa, land conflicts arise between smallholder farmers and pastoralists over collectively used resources such as land, water or forests. To avoid such conflicts, GIZ supports municipalities in developing local land use agreements (*chartes foncières locales*) that are based on local customs and land use practices and take into account the diversity of local environmental, economic, social and cultural conditions.

The agreements stipulate who is allowed to use which area, when and how. It is crucial that these rules are negotiated and decided collectively. Their preparation follows an agreed formula that includes informing and raising public awareness, drawing up inventories of existing resources, approval of the adopted charter by the municipal councils, and entry in the register of land use agreements.

GIZ supports the provision of training for the members of the democratically elected village development committees so that they can make independent and long-term contributions to the preparation and implementation of the agreements, including the demarcation of livestock corridors and pastures. The stronger integration of pastoralists in local committees and their participatory actions are also promoted. In some cases, GIZ funds mobile theatre groups that illustrate the causes of and possible solutions to typical land conflicts to the village community.



Uganda: Hybrid dispute resolution teams

Poor communities in rural Uganda are often reliant on traditional mechanisms to resolve land conflicts because they lack access to professional legal advice. The committees concerned tend to be dominated by – not always neutral – male clan leaders. Because they are supplied by the parties to the conflict and have their transport costs paid, there is a risk that they will make decisions in favour of the more financially well-situated party to the conflict.

To improve this situation, GIZ supported the creation of Village Dispute Resolution Teams (VDRTs), which are elected at the village level and include traditional authorities as well as representatives of state institutions and the most important population groups. Due to the many actors involved, they are referred to as hybrid structures.

Each VDRT consists of five members: a clan leader, an elder, the chairperson of the local council, a women's representative and a person who represents the interests of young people. Team members complete two four-day training sessions on topics such as land tenure rights, social justice, peacebuilding, and conflict resolution, with a focus on mediation. Conflicts that the VDRTs cannot resolve are referred to a comparable team at the next level up (Parish Dispute Resolution Teams – PDRTs). In addition to the actual mediation, this alternative conflict resolution process also includes the team responsible for mapping and documenting land ownership and issuing land documents (land inventory protocol or certificates of customary ownership).

In certain areas where conflicts between landowners and tenants predominate, the VDRT mechanism has been adapted to the local conditions. For example, specialists with solid basic legal knowledge (paralegals) are also employed here.



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

84 per cent,
or 11,700 of the approximately
13,800 land conflicts in GIZ project areas,
have been resolved, most of them with
civil society participation.

In **771 villages and 26 districts**,
state and non-state actors established
mechanisms for recording and dealing with
land conflicts.

The local communities
in the project areas have access to
15 complaint mechanisms.

Key messages

1 Land conflicts arise when different actors pursue different interests relating to access, use and control of land and natural resources. These different interests and needs must be taken into account in the prevention and resolution of land conflicts. This is usually achieved most effectively through participatory processes.

2 Responsible land management is a good basis for preventing conflicts. It includes participatory land use planning in which all local land users collectively negotiate land use agreements, participatory documentation of land rights, and inclusive village committees that decide on land use and access rights.

3 Conflict resolution mechanisms are more successful when they involve elected representatives of the most important population groups as well as representatives of traditional and state structures and support the parties to the conflict in negotiating a solution acceptable to all. Facilitated negotiation, mediation and conciliation are therefore suitable tools for the resolution of land conflicts.

All interests and **needs**
must be taken into account
in the prevention and resolution
of land conflicts.





Recommendations for development cooperation

1. Integrate the prevention of land conflicts into the legal framework: Measures for land conflict prevention that focus on securing land rights, land use planning or local land use agreements, for example, should be integrated into the local legal framework.

2. Training for local communities on user agreements: Members of affected local communities should receive full training in conducting local user agreement processes independently and implementing them in the long term.

3. Strengthening conflict resolution mechanisms based on existing systems: Measures to strengthen conflict resolution mechanisms should primarily build on existing systems and expand or restructure them as needed.

4. Training committee members in analysis, law and mediation: Committee members and their partners should be trained to analyse conflicts, understand the relevant legal framework and conduct mediation.

Responsible land management at all levels can prevent land conflicts.





Learn more

GIZ (2023): Ethiopia: Community-Investor-Government Fora (CIGF) – a Regular Exchange Platform for Communities, Investors and Government Representatives

GIZ (2020): Land Conflict Resolution Approach by RELAPU (Responsible Land Policy in Uganda)

GIZ (2017): Understanding, Preventing and Solving Land Conflicts: A Practical Guide and Toolbox

Serwat, Ladd (2024): Understanding Institutional Access, Strengthening and Coordination for Land Dispute Resolution. Experiences from LAND-at-scale Interventions. LANDac, LAND-at-scale

United Nations Interagency Framework Team for Preventive Action (2012): Land and Conflict: Toolkit and Guidance for Preventing and Managing Land and Natural Resources Conflict

USAID (2004): Land and Conflict - a Toolkit for Intervention

As a federal enterprise, GIZ supports the German federal government in achieving its goals in international cooperation for sustainable development.

Published by:
Deutsche Gesellschaft für
Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH

Registered offices
Bonn and Eschborn

Global Programme Responsible Land Policy
landmanagement@giz.de

Friedrich Ebert Allee 32 + 36
53113 Bonn, Germany
T +49 228 44 60-0
F +49 228 44 60-17 66

E info@giz.de
I www.giz.de

Authors:
Oliver Puginier, Sofia Schirocky, Alexander Strunck, Alina Stamm

On behalf of

Federal Ministry
for Economic Cooperation
and Development

Responsible:
Maraile Görgen, maraile.goergen@giz.de

Design:
Agnes Weegen, Köln, and Studio Kattrin Richter, Berlin

Photo credits/sources:
Page 1 © GIZ ProPFR Benin
Page 2 © GIZ/DA/SOURA Awa
Page 3 © Cyrille Kouassi Koki, Audace Institute Afrique
Page 4 © GIZ Cyrille Kouassi Koki
Page 5 top and bottom © GIZ ProPFR Niger
Page 6 © Cyrille Kouassi Koki, Audace Institute Afrique

GIZ is responsible for the content of this publication.

Bonn, October 2025