

Land rights promote food security

Secure access to land encourages investment, thus increasing agricultural productivity and food security.

Background

By 2030, everyone should have enough food to eat a healthy and balanced diet. But there is still a long way to go before United Nations Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 2 'Zero Hunger' can be achieved.

Food security is one of the greatest global challenges, and the current situation is alarming. 733 million people were affected by hunger in 2024 – 152 million more than in 2019 (FAO, 2025). More than 2.3 billion people lack secure access to healthy and affordable food. The world is currently experiencing devastating conflict and instability, and changing climatic conditions are also exacerbating food crises. Large areas of agricultural land are degrading and crop yields are falling. Most undernourished people live in rural areas.

Land rights are a crucial but often overlooked factor for long-term food security. If smallholder farmers do not know whether they can use their land for agriculture in the long term, they invest less in soil health and sustainable farming methods such as agroforestry. Without this investment, however, agricultural productivity remains low. In addition, people without secured land rights often have no access to credit because they cannot use their land as collateral. This leads to a vicious circle of low productivity, poverty and food insecurity.

Land rights that are clearly defined, long-term, enforceable, adequate, social, transferable and legally legitimate can break this vicious circle. They create incentives to invest in the protection of soils and the rehabilitation of degraded land. They also enable smallholder farmers to gain access to financial services and create the conditions for long-term land use. Higher agricultural productivity improves food security in two ways: first, smallholder farmers grow more food for their own consumption, and second, they earn higher incomes that allow them to buy more and higher-quality food.

In many countries, land and land use rights are not formally regulated or sufficiently protected or documented. Land, as well as production inputs such as water, seed, fertilisers and equipment, is often unevenly distributed or inadequately managed. Increasingly, investors are appropriating land that traditionally belongs to smallholder farmers but for which no official property titles exist (land grabbing).

Secure land rights are therefore a key factor for food security and food sovereignty and are crucial for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, in particular SDG 1 (No Poverty), SDG 2 (Zero Hunger), SDG 5 (Gender Equality) and SDG 15 (Life on Land). They are also essential for achieving the objectives of the United Nations Food Systems Summit (UNFSS) and the three UN Rio Conventions, namely the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD), the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC).



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Solutions from development cooperation

Securing land rights: Land rights that are better secured, for example through land titles and transparent land distribution processes, have positive effects on smallholders' productivity and incomes. For millions of young people, land rights are an important prerequisite for developing viable long-term prospects in rural areas as an alternative to selling their land and migrating to cities.

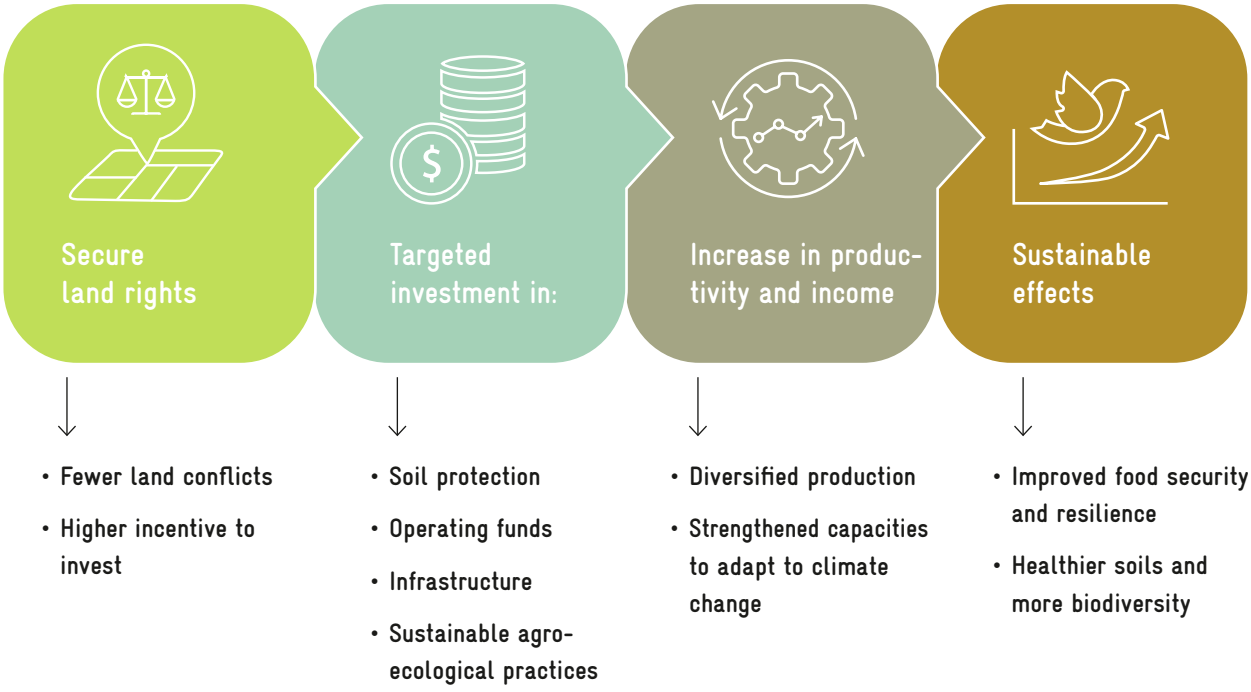
Reducing land conflicts: Conflicts over land and natural resources often impede sustainable agricultural production and investment in land. Therefore, in terms of food security, it is important to resolve such conflicts and take steps to prevent them in the long term, for example within the framework of just, transparent and participatory land distribution systems and conflict resolution mechanisms.

Strengthening women's land rights: The positive effects of secure land rights on food security are particularly pronounced among women. Land rights form an important basis for their socio-economic empowerment. Furthermore, their decisions concerning the land are particularly oriented towards the nutritional needs of the family. At the same time, women have fewer land rights than men and their access to land must therefore be particularly promoted in the interests of gender equality.

Protecting traditional land rights: Indigenous communities' traditional land and resource usage rights are usually not officially documented, and their land is often incorrectly designated 'no man's land'. Officially secured land rights can prevent displacement and create the basis for indigenous communities to produce sufficient healthy food and practise their traditional forms of farming.

Promoting sustainable agricultural investment: Secure land rights increase the security that smallholder farmers need for forward planning and lead to more investment in agricultural production, among other things through improved access to credit. Securing land rights and supporting such investment, for example through training in sustainable farming methods, should therefore go hand in hand.

Effects of secured land rights



Ethiopia: Improved legal and institutional framework

In Ethiopia, the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH's 'Support to Responsible Agricultural Investment' project has significantly increased food security by strengthening local communities' land rights. The starting point was the realisation that inadequate legal and institutional frameworks prevent progress in agricultural development and make it difficult for communities to use agricultural land sustainably.

The project, supported by GIZ's Global Programme Responsible Land Policy (GPRLP), initially strengthened the institutional framework for greater food security by improving coordination between national and regional authorities. More than 860 civil servants, investors and representatives of civil society attended workshops to gain knowledge about land rights, environmental and social sustainability and land management systems, raising their awareness of the importance of secure land rights and sustainable agricultural investment.

Technical guidelines have been developed and introduced, such as a Social and Environmental Code of Practice (SECoP), which sets clear standards for responsible action by investors and public authorities with regard to land rights. In addition, modern IT tools such as the Commercial Agriculture Management Information System (CAMIS) and remote sensing applications have been introduced to improve the management and monitoring of agricultural investment.

In cooperation with civil society organisations, the project partners remediated agricultural land and thus prevented soil erosion. This allowed smallholder farmers to make better use of the land for agriculture and increase their harvests. Finally, curricula that support responsible land use rights were developed in cooperation with universities in order to integrate this topic into higher education in the long term.

Madagascar: Land certificates and more knowledge about sustainable farming methods

Around a third of Madagascar's land area is degraded, posing a serious risk to food security. Because many smallholder farmers cultivate their land without secure property rights, they rarely invest in the land and land conflicts often occur. Women are particularly disadvantaged in this respect.

GIZ's global programmes 'Responsible Land Policy' and 'Soil Protection and Soil Rehabilitation for Food Security' (ProSOL) improve the legal protection of land ownership, for example by supporting the issuance of land certificates and organising training courses on sustainable, agroecological farming methods for smallholders.

So far, local authorities have issued (community) land certificates to almost 95,000 households – mainly for agricultural land. In addition, 5,000 hectares of pasture land have been identified and protected together with local communities. Women benefit particularly: their share of secure land rights increases and their economic and social position is strengthened.



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

As part of this global programme, local authorities issued land certificates to **more than 650,000 households** in a total of 10 countries.

In Ethiopia, **368,000 households secured** their land rights in this way, while in Madagascar, **94,800 households benefited**.

This has ensured access to food and resources for **3.5 million people**.

Key messages

1 Land rights are an essential factor for long-term food security. This is because land rights create incentives for investment in the protection of soils and the rehabilitation of degraded land. They also enable smallholder farmers to gain access to financial services and create the conditions for long-term land use. Higher agricultural productivity improves food security because smallholder farmers can grow more food for their own consumption and earn higher incomes that allow them to buy more and better-quality food.

2 Legal certainty alone is not enough: In order for smallholder farmers to improve food security in their communities with the help of their secured land rights, they need knowledge of sustainable farming methods, as well as access to markets and financing for investment.

3 Women need targeted support. They are often excluded from acquiring land rights, even though they make a significant contribution to food security for their families.

Smallholder farmers need **knowledge** of **sustainable farming methods** as well as **access to financing** and **markets** in order to be able to add value from their land rights.







Recommendations for development cooperation

1. Consider land rights in strategies: The development cooperation community should systematically integrate the securing of land rights into its strategies to support sustainable development in partner countries.

2. Strengthen institutions in the land sector: Partner countries should be supported in building and strengthening institutions in the land sector, for example through village committees to resolve land conflicts.

3. Promote cross-sectoral policies: Cross-sectoral policies should be promoted in partner countries, for example through the implementation of territorial planning and development strategies for rural areas.

4. Integration of safeguards into international agreements: Safeguards for land rights should be integrated into and promoted in the United Nations' three Rio Conventions (UNFCCC, CBD, UNCCD).

5. Strengthen civil society organisations and political participation: Civil society organisations must be strengthened and political participation by marginalised groups such as women, young people and indigenous and local communities in dialogue forums must be promoted so that they can play a key role in the transformation of agricultural and food systems.

6. Link land rights and food policy: Securing land rights should be integrated into food policy in order to improve cross-sectoral coordination, sustainably embed healthy diets into national strategies and build institutional capacities at the food security-land rights nexus.

7. Build local resilience through sustainable agriculture: Households' resilience to hunger and malnutrition should be improved and local food systems made more sustainable by promoting diversified agroecological farming methods – for example through training – and by providing support for storage and processing of crops and seed propagation.

Civil society
and **marginalised groups**
have a key role to play in
transforming agricultural
and **food systems**.



Learn more

BMZ: Special Initiative 'Transformation of Agricultural and Food Systems'

FAO (2025): The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2025

GNAFC and FSIN (2023): Global Report on Food Crises

Welthungerhilfe (2024): 2024 Global Hunger Index: How Gender Justice Can Advance Climate Resilience and Zero Hunger

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