

MULTISTAKEHOLDER PLATFORMS FOR LAND GOVERNANCE – 10 YEARS AFTER: A COLLABORATIVE CAPITALISATION OF EXPERIENCE

Lessons learned across four programmes working on land governance



Villagers attend a meeting for participatory resource use mapping with Wildlife Conservation Society team in Preah Vihear Province in Cambodia ©MRLG

CHRISTIAN CASTELLANET

Land governance has attracted much attention from the international community in the past two decades, as tenure security is recognised as an important condition for agricultural investment and sustainable natural resource management. A lack of tenure security, especially for smallholder farmers and traditional and Indigenous communities, is a major cause of growing inequality, land grabbing, poverty and conflict.

After the adoption of the Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure¹ by the Committee on World Food Security in 2012, many international development programmes have been supporting implementation at the country level. One modality recommended by the Guidelines is

to support multistakeholder platforms to improve land governance for farmers and local communities.

In 2024, four international land governance programmes² embarked on a joint reflection to review, compare and analyse their experiences of working with multistakeholder platforms. From these four programmes, five case studies based in Burkina Faso, Cambodia, Lao PDR, Guinea and Malawi were prepared based on a common framework. Each case involved long-term, intensive and diverse engagement on a particular policy topic. The cases offer clear, observable changes as a result of the strategy and activities implemented by each of the multistakeholder platforms.

¹ Full name: the Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests in the Context of National Food Security.

² A description and links to the four programmes can be found on the final page of this brief.

CASE STUDIES:

- Scurrah, N., & Deligne, A. (2025). *Lessons learned from policy engagement for community rights within protected areas of Cambodia*. Case Study, Capex Series #1. Vientiane: MRLG.
- Ling, S., & Bounphasouk, D. (2025). *Lessons learned from policy engagement in Lao PDR: Instruction 0457 and the establishment of responsible agricultural investment practices*. Case Study, Capex Series #2. Vientiane: MRLG.
- Chibwana-Nkhata, K., & Essimi Biloa, A.C. (2025). *Advocating for people-centred land governance in Malawi. The contribution of the National Land Coalition*. Case Study, Capex Series #6. Vientiane and Rome: MRLG and ILC.
- Issifou I. S. et Nabé A. (2025). *Understanding policy engagement and the impact of a multistakeholder platform in Burkina-Faso*. Case study, Capex series #7. Vientiane and Bonn: MRLG and Welthungerhilfe
- Tonguino, P., Bah, M., & Camara, M. (2025). *Contribution of the multistakeholder platform on land governance to the formulation of national agricultural land tenure policies in Guinea*. Case study, Capex series #8. Conakry, Paris and Vientiane: ACORD Guinea, CNOP-G, CTFD and MRLG.

This brief is a summary of findings of the political contexts, structure, governance and operational models of the platforms. It presents platform contributions to changes in policy and practice and provides key learnings that could be applied to land governance programming across multiple contexts.



A representative from the Lao Farmers Network shares his perspective at the 2023 Multi-Stakeholder Dialogue on Responsible Agricultural Investment ©MRLG

IMPORTANCE OF THE POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT

There is not one ideal type of multistakeholder platform for land governance. The overall political environment and policy landscape on land governance shape how a platform is structured and operates.

The degree to which a government is open to pro-poor reforms and civil society engagement directly influences not only platform strategies and results but also their composition and governance. Some authoritarian governments are resistant to civil society participation in policy processes and will not join multistakeholder platforms. Other governments are supportive of such consultation and may participate in or even co-chair these platforms. Alternatively, some governments recognise the value of civil society input in policy but prefer to restrict it to a purely consultative level. Openness often correlates with a country's level of democracy and the political power that smallholder farmers – who often form the majority of the population – can exercise through their votes.

Two different types of platforms were found in the cases studied:

- **Inclusive platforms with government participation and representation of all stakeholders**, seen in contexts where the government is open to broad consultation and participation of civil society and other actors in policymaking.
- **More focused coalitions of actors who develop technically oriented activities** in a specific thematic area, in cooperation with government.



General assembly of the National Multistakeholder Platform on Land in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso ©PMAF

LEGITIMACY AND CREDIBILITY

To operate effectively, all platforms require some level of legitimacy towards government and other stakeholders. The two types of platforms observed are based on **two distinct sources of legitimacy**. On one hand, **inclusiveness** and the capacity to represent all voices and interests is key to inclusive platform legitimacy. On the other hand, **credibility and trustworthiness** are essential for government technical services to accept engagement with technically oriented coalitions.

Credibility is based on a platform's capacity to demonstrate comprehensive knowledge of the land governance policy and legal framework, and to use the same terminology as experts and specialists. It

also requires precise and verifiable information on how a policy is being implemented on the ground and the challenges encountered. Some inclusive platforms also develop their technical credibility by including experts or academics in the platform itself or in activity implementation.

To maintain legitimacy, all platforms must demonstrate **political neutrality**. This means not becoming involved in national politics by supporting a specific political group or party. However, this does not prevent platforms from advocating for specific norms and values or maintaining a clear ethical commitment to the rights of marginalised groups, smallholder farmers, Indigenous peoples and women.



Meeting of the partners involved in the Multistakeholder Platform on Land in Guinea ©ACORD

STRUCTURE AND GOVERNANCE OF MULTISTAKEHOLDER PLATFORMS

Governance of platforms is generally organised as follows:

1. **General membership:** This is the broadest group, often quite numerous and including civil society, government, academia, media and sometimes the private sector. Members are invited to general information and consultation meetings once or twice a year. Membership is typically not formalised through an application process.
2. **Steering committee or technical group:** This smaller group, ranging from 6 to 16 members, is more actively involved in the platform's strategic direction. Members participate in regular meetings to discuss the platform's strategy and action plan.

3. **Secretariat:** This body plays an important role in planning, coordinating and either executing or contracting most of the platform's activities.

Most platforms are not registered as legal entities but they may have formal by-laws for decision-making processes. Registering as a legal entity can help prevent potential conflicts of interest between the secretariat and active members. However, it also carries the risk of the platform losing its collaborative and inclusive spirit and simply becoming just another civil society organisation. **In terms of sustainability, the platform's ability to mobilise diverse funding through its lead organisation is more important than its registration status.**



A pilot in Khammouane province, Lao PDR to recognize customary tenure for villages in state forestland ©Leonard Reyes/MRLG



LandNet members during a platform coordination meeting in 2018 in Malawi ©Kate Chibwana

BUILDING AND SUSTAINING MULTISTAKEHOLDER PLATFORMS

During the establishment of a platform, often initiated by an international programme or organisation, it is important to identify a strong lead organisation that can eventually take on the role of secretariat. This can sometimes be a lengthy process if several organisations are competing for leadership.

The secretariat plays a major role in the development and success of a platform. The secretariat staff must have two essential qualities. They must be skilled facilitators to effectively bring members together and help align their agendas. They must also be recognised experts in land policy to have credibility with the government and other stakeholders. In principle, the steering committee is responsible for the development of the strategy and plan of action. In practice, the secretariat plays a major role in these functions.

However, a strong lead organisation can pose a risk. It might take the credit for the platform's achievements or use the human and financial resources to advance its own agenda. In these cases, the **steering committee's ability to act as a check on power is essential.**

In some cases, the establishment and design of the platform are supported by external staff employed or commissioned by an international programme. This can help overcome initial difficulties in identifying a strong leader and aligning positions, but it leaves open the question of the emergence of a strong secretariat.

DEVELOPING A PLATFORM STRATEGY

Developing a platform strategy is often a lengthy process. It begins with leveraging the knowledge of platform members on the legal aspects of land governance and establishing their alignment on the main challenges. This process then leads to the development of a **theory of change**.

A political economy and stakeholder analysis is a powerful tool to identify achievable results and map out allies and opponents, particularly within various government sectors. However, this needs a high level of expertise and can be challenging in contexts where governments do not disclose internal disagreements or debates. It is also important to recognise that understanding a challenge does not always lead to an effective strategy to overcome it. Some issues, like entrenched systems of patronage and corruption within ministries, may remain intractable.

IDENTIFYING PLATFORM ALLIES

Finding **champions or allies within the government sector is an important element of an effective communication and influence strategy.** In some instances, an entire ministry or department may be a clear ally, openly supporting pro-people land governance reforms. In other cases, allies must be identified through personal networks with influential decision makers. **The platform's capacity to mobilise its members' broader networks is therefore essential.**

Platforms can also sometimes leverage 'go-betweens' – platform members that transition into or from government roles. If a government decides to implement a reform long advocated by the platform, it can draw on the platform's accumulated expertise and networks through these individuals. However, this carries risks. It can jeopardise the platform's political neutrality or result in a loss of credibility if the individual is unable or unwilling to implement the proposed changes.

Donors are also a key group of allies. Platforms are often linked with international technical and financial partners who are interested in land governance and natural resource management. When these partners are already funding projects with relevant ministries, real synergies can be found. In some cases, platforms would not be accepted by governments or even

exist without donor support and funding. **Effective communication and cooperation between donor partners and platforms are crucial for success.** Conflicting agendas among donors can undermine a platform's position, although cases exist where platforms have successfully pushed back on proposed donor programmes perceived as inadequate.

STRATEGIC ALIGNMENT WITH THE POLICY CYCLE

A platform's strategy is directly tied to where a land governance issue stands within the policy cycle. If the issue is not yet recognised or is not a government priority, the focus will be on **raising awareness** to get the issue on the policy agenda. If the policy is already under formulation or adoption, the platform's efforts are aimed at **influencing the content of the proposed legislation** and lobbying decision makers. Once a law has been passed, the strategy shifts to **ensuring effective implementation** on the ground and monitoring its results.

An additional component of a platform's strategy concerns **rights-based approaches: strengthening civil society and local stakeholders who are directly affected by power imbalances.** It implies building the individual and collective capacities of civil society and local stakeholders to defend their rights under existing laws and to resist illegal practices.



Agricultural low land disappearing under urban development pressure in Dubreka, Guinea ©Amel Benkahla



Farmers tending their upland rice crop in Luang Prabang province, Lao PDR ©MRLC/Bart Verweij

Platforms and donors often place great emphasis on improving the legal framework, viewing the passing of a new law as the best example of success. However, a change in the law is only one step towards ensuring land tenure security for smallholders. Many examples show that officially adopted laws remain largely theoretical in the absence of mechanisms or budget for effective implementation, sensitisation or support for legal recourse. Legislation may also be circumvented by different interest groups who exploit loopholes. **Supporting the implementation of legislation is therefore a fundamental function for platform contributions.**

Strengthening civil society and empowering local stakeholders is also an important function that is not always explicitly recognised. This approach is often the only viable option in contexts where there is little to no government support for reform.

With external observers and technical and financial partners often focusing on legal reform as the single or primary measure of success, it is important to **recognise the value of supporting implementation and capacity-building** at all levels, especially at the community level. In many cases, these strategies are more effective in changing the situation for local communities in practice. This is provided that **significant investments are made by governments and donors to permit implementation at scale.**

ALIGNING WITH INTERNATIONAL AGENDAS

It is desirable to align strategies and action plans with international agendas whenever possible. International guidelines – such as the Voluntary Guidelines – can legitimise a platform's position in the policy debate. **Governments are often more receptive to proposed reforms when they help to meet international or subregional commitments,** although influential international guidelines have limitations because of their non-binding nature.

ADAPTABILITY

Adaptation and flexibility are key for success. Platforms must be flexible enough to respond quickly to new opportunities or unforeseen events that negatively affect communities. The political cycle is often unpredictable and windows of opportunity may open unexpectedly, such as when a new government gives fresh impetus to land governance reform or when a new law is suddenly scheduled for adoption after long periods of inactivity. **Flexibility in funding is important for the platforms to be able to adapt to the changing political context.**



Wildlife Conservation Society team and members of the Baray Kham Keut Community Protected Area in Preah Vihear province, Cambodia ©MRLG

MULTISTAKEHOLDER PLATFORM MECHANISMS

Whether the focus is on law making, law implementation or capacity-building, platforms operate through various mechanisms. These include dialogue with government, evidence-based advocacy, capacity-building and mediation.

Dialogue with government can be through various modalities, including national consultations, technical working groups, or informal discussions between the secretariat and government members. An important function of the platform is to facilitate communication in both directions – top-down (informing local stakeholders about existing and proposed policies) and bottom-up (bringing stakeholders' expectations and problems on the ground up to central administration). Platforms with established **subnational platforms** that are integrated into their governance structures have a major advantage. This structure provides legitimacy by incorporating the voices of local communities and institutions, and it strengthens their capacity to advocate for specific laws by garnering support from local organisations.

Evidence for policy dialogue and advocacy is generated through multiple methods that include analysing legal frameworks, assessing the impacts of laws, and documenting innovative local solutions. **The participatory nature of research is especially important for building trust and credibility with national authorities.** When local stakeholders and officials are involved in the research process, the findings carry more weight. The process of discussing and formulating recommendations is sometimes more influential than the final dissemination of a report. Local authorities and technical departments involved in the process are more open to implementing these recommendations.

Academic research helps raise awareness at both the national and international level on land governance issues in a particular country or region. Consideration must be given to how results are framed. Research findings that are overly critical of governments can draw the attention of the international community and donors, but may also provoke negative reactions from government. For this reason, platforms tend not to engage in this level of commentary.

Implementing pilots of new policies is another way platforms can contribute to the policy debate. Pilots are implemented jointly with the relevant government departments. This modality is mostly found in contexts where platforms are technically oriented and restricted to a few partners.

Capacity-building for both members and external stakeholders is an essential function of platforms. Members can build their capacity through sharing information and perspectives on land governance to develop a common vision and strategy. **Regional exchanges**, through transnational field visits or regional forums, also contribute to capacity-building.

Platforms also play an important role in **strengthening the capacity of local communities and organisations regarding legislation and their rights**. This enables communities to use existing laws to defend their rights and resolve conflicts, and to participate in implementing new laws at the local level.

The **mediation role** between various stakeholders and government is a common feature across all platforms. Platforms are also instrumental in breaking down barriers between different government departments and ministries. These

often operate in silos, pursuing their own agendas with limited coordination or information exchange due to power struggles or bureaucratic structures. In some cases, platforms act as a mediator between local communities and private investors.

OBSERVABLE CHANGES IN POLICY AND PRACTICE

Direct impacts on policies were observed in all four programmes. In three of the five cases studied, new legislation has been adopted as a result of platform engagement. In three of the case studies, platforms have also been instrumental in **bridging the gap between progressive laws and their actual implementation**, which often lags behind.

All platforms have **strengthened the capacity of members** through a shared understanding of policy frameworks and problems to be addressed and, in two countries, local stakeholders are better able to claim their rights. Platforms have also played a role in **changing the public narrative**, making it easier to advocate for new policies and practices at all levels of society.



A farmer tends to his mangrove rice field in Guinea Maritime ©Amel Benkahla



A farmer who invested in strawberry production in Luang Prabang province, Lao PDR ©MRLG

MEASURING IMPACT

Measuring the impact of platforms on land governance is challenging. It is relatively easy to observe changes in policies and laws, **but they often happen as a result of many years of discussion and engagement, exceeding the typical project timeline of three to four years.** Even when a policy change does occur, it is hard to determine exactly how much a specific platform contributed to that success.

It is even more difficult to measure the impact of capacity-building, raising public awareness, or a shift in the public narrative. This can be a problem for donors who require measurable, verifiable indicators. **Forcing platforms to narrow their goals to a single policy change can be counterproductive, as the political process is often unpredictable.**

LONGEVITY AND SUSTAINABILITY

The effectiveness of multistakeholder platforms depends heavily on **their longevity, as trust and legitimacy are built over time.** This long-term presence also allows platforms to capitalise on unexpected opportunities and navigate the slow, unpredictable pace of policy reform. Recognising that improving land governance is a long-term process, platforms must be supported for an extended period to be effective. When new legislation is successfully introduced, it is crucial that funding is secured for effective implementation. One potential approach could be for donors to consider coordinating efforts through multi-donor or pooled funds to ensure the sustainability of platforms.

CONCLUSIONS

Investing in multistakeholder platforms is a long-term commitment that can yield significant results in some contexts, but success cannot always be guaranteed. While traditional land tenure projects – such as those focused on registration – are easier to measure, they are more costly and may not be more effective in the long run, especially in countries where customary rights are prevalent. Doing nothing is also not an option, as the link between land tenure insecurity, armed conflict and environmental degradation is well established.

With new priorities on the international agenda, support for land governance programmes is decreasing. However, lessons from the cases studied suggest that programmes that support multistakeholder platforms can be effective by **adopting strategic and flexible approaches** that acknowledge the complexities of land governance reform.

Key overarching principles for application to future programming across multiple contexts include:

- **investing in platforms over the long term**
- **supporting platform models appropriate for the national political context**
- **prioritising flexibility in strategy design**
- **appreciating the value of processes rather than direct results**
- **strengthening the link between policy processes and implementation**

When positive legal change occurs, it is important to seize the opportunity. **Donors and governments should channel substantial funds towards implementation to ensure that policy translates into tangible benefits for local communities.**



Rice fields scenery in Malawi ©Nikada

This brief summarises some of the key lessons from the original study: Castellonet, C. (2025). *Multistakeholder platforms for land governance – 10 years after: A collaborative capitalisation of experience*. Capitalisation of Experience Series #9. Vientiane: MRLG.

Editor and reviewers: T.A. Garraghan, Antoine Deligne, Aurore Mansion, Manohisoa Rakotondrabe, Alain Essimi Biloa, Anna Schreiber and Amel Benkahla

Layout and Design: Watcharapol Isarangkul Na Ayuthaya

Full Citation: Castellonet, C. (2025). *Multistakeholder platforms for land governance – 10 years after: A collaborative capitalisation of experience. Summary of lessons*. Capitalisation of Experience Series #10. Vientiane: MRLG.



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The Capitalisation of Experience draws lessons learned from improving land governance through multistakeholder platforms for policy dialogue, and is a joint effort of the following four organisations:



Comité Technique Foncier et Développement (CTFD) is a platform of multidisciplinary experts that discusses and debates rural and urban land issues in the Global South. CTFD meets under the tutelage of the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the *Agence Française de Développement (AFD)*.

Please visit www.foncier-developpement.fr

The **International Land Coalition (ILC)** is an independent global alliance of People's Organisations, civil society and intergovernmental organisations working together to put people at the centre of land governance.

Please visit www.landcoalition.org

The **Mekong Region Land Governance Project (MRLG)** is a project of the Government of Switzerland, through the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), with co-financing from the Government of Germany and the Government of Luxembourg. MRLG has been working to improve the land tenure security of smallholder farmers in the Mekong Region since 2014.

Please visit www.mrlg.org

Welthungerhilfe (WHH) is a private aid agency in Germany; politically and religiously independent that fights for "Zero Hunger by 2030". **Land for Life Project** is supporting multi-actor partnerships working on land governance in Ethiopia, Burkina Faso, Liberia, Sierra Leone and Germany.

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