

Ten years of VGGT – a stocktaking

May 2022 marked the 10th anniversary of the endorsement of the Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests (VGGT). Our authors provide examples from various countries to demonstrate what has been achieved with the Guidelines so far and where there is still need for action.

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The Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests (VGGT) in the Context of National Food Security were launched in 2012 by the UN Committee on World Food Security (CFS). In addition to the overarching goal of “achieving food security for all” and “supporting the right to adequate food in the context of national food security”, the Guidelines intend to contribute to achieving sustainable livelihoods, social stability, rural development, environmental protection, and inclusive social and economic development.

In the context of VGGT implementation, particular effort was given to making the voices of marginalised groups heard – by providing a framework for civil society organisations, small-holder farmers’ groups, Indigenous Peoples and pastoralist and fisherfolk communities to contribute to policy discussions and by supporting inclusive multi-stakeholder engagement. In order to enhance global, regional and local processes to improve governance of tenure through collaborative partnerships, over the last ten years, the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) provided technical assistance, training and capacity development, as well as supporting the assessment, formulation and implementation of relevant national policies and laws in around 60 countries in Africa, Asia, Latin America and Europe, with women’s land rights always playing a large role in the design and implementation of the initiatives.

Some success stories ...

Senegal was one of the first countries to set up a national platform for multi-stakeholder dialogue in 2014, as suggested in paragraph 26.2 of the VGGT. The platform, which includes actors from civil society organisations, academia, the government, the private sector, local authorities and producer organisations, established a representative steering committee, *Comité de Pilotage des Directives Volontaires pour une gouvernance responsable des régimes fonciers* (COPIL DV/ GF), the technical arm of the national platform. COPIL will facilitate the dialogue process on tenure governance



Secure land rights are of vital importance for women in particular.

Photo: IFAD/ G.M.B. Akash

with a dialogue mechanism created in 2014 which drives the country implementation of the VGGT. The multi-stakeholder platform (MSP) provides a deep analysis of land issues, including agribusiness developments, environmental issues, land degradation, land negotiation and conflict resolution. Very concretely, the local MSP supported the setup of a land conflict management committee comprising mayors willing to gather and advise community members on conflict resolution.

In **Sierra Leone**, the VGGT were introduced in 2014 through a national workshop and the establishment of a multi-stakeholder platform. A critical mass of stakeholders from government, civil society, the private sector, academia and traditional authorities was mobilised and a community of practice was built around governance of tenure of land, fisheries and forests. The VGGT principles have been integrated in the National Land Policy (NLP). For implementing them, the government of Sierra Leone received support in the use of new low-cost technologies, such as the “Open Tenure/ Solutions for Open Land Administration (SOLA)” application, with which 11,750 hectares of customary tenure rights were demarcated and validated, and the geo-referenced property maps were approved by the

Ministry of Lands. These technologies, easy to use by farmers, particularly by rural youth, and the participatory approach adopted helped facilitate conflict prevention and resolution. With about 90 paragraphs making direct reference to the principles, the country’s land policy is widely viewed as one most closely adhering to the VGGT principles. Moreover, FAO is supporting Sierra Leone and the Technical Working Group of the MSP in the drafting process of new Customary Land and Land Commission Bills.

Uganda has been actively engaging in the implementation of the VGGTs since the approval of its National Land Policy in 2013. A series of national workshops facilitated a multi-stakeholder dialogue on tenure issues, especially in land and forestry sectors, and a VGGT Secretariat was established in the Ministry of Lands, Housing and Urban Development to coordinate implementation in the country. FAO’s support to the government on forest tenure resulted in 56 Forest Management Plans (FMP). The District Local Councils approved the FMPs following a participatory validation process by local communities and private forest holders. With the help of SOLA, more than 4,700 parcels were mapped and 4,000 Certificates of Customary Ownerships registered.

In **Mongolia**, the VGGT were introduced in 2014 and translated into Mongolian, along with a *Technical Guide on Pastureland*, to reach out to local communities. As the term “tenure” did not exist in Mongolian, the translation of the VGGT required reaching consensus around new concepts, resulting in a change of mindset, as seen from reference to customary rights made for the first time in the decree on the Soum Territorial Development Plan. Furthermore, Mongolia was one of the first countries to assess forest tenure governance using an approach based on VGGT principles, which have also accelerated the preparation of formal legislation related to pastoral land, securing the legitimate tenure rights of nomad herders.

The government of **Colombia** initiated a land regularisation programme based on the VGGT which involved joint administration of national park territories by the National Parks Agency and indigenous communities. Practical training courses on the community tenure geospatial recording tool “Open Tenure” have been organised. Following the VGGT, a transparent and inclusive process was put in place to identify stakeholders and rights-holders throughout the steps of tenure rights recording. The Afro-descendent community partner, Cocomasur, used the tool to support land use planning and forest governance, as well as updating the internal census. Users were interested in how Open Tenure can allow a household to register both husband and wife as 50 per cent owners of their land and resources – an initial step in addressing discriminatory inheritance practices.

In **Guatemala**, the Government integrated the VGGT in the new land governance policy, which is part of the overall Rural Development Policy promoting sustainable development through access to land and land tenure security. The new land policy recognises and strengthens indigenous communal systems of land tenure and management, including land law and jurisdiction. It also recognises and promotes women’s rights to land and seeks to promote the rural economy and contribute to the competitiveness of rural areas and their full integration into the national economy. Improving the capacity of people and organisations and their understanding of land policy issues has been a theme throughout the process.

Remaining challenges

While important achievements were made over the ten years of VGGT implementation,

old and new challenges have been affecting secure tenure rights and inclusive land governance at global, regional and local levels. No doubt one of the most important of these is climate change, the consequences of which (increase of climate-related disasters, limited access to water, reduction of water quality, increase of land-related conflicts, land degradation, displacement, etc.) are very likely to cause severe adverse impacts and consequences to tenure arrangements, potentially harming the poor and vulnerable in particular. Armed conflict can also lead to the disintegration of property rights, as can peace-building processes, in the course of which the affected population will start to (re-)claim or access properties, lands and land-based resources.

Moreover, unequal access to land, insecurity of tenure and non-favourable policy environments continue to affect many rural households in a number of developing countries and emerging economies, with huge disparities in the control of agricultural land. Within households, gender inequalities are particularly persistent. Women, who are often the ones most engaged in food-related agricultural production and sustaining household food consumption, usually have less access to natural resources. Tenure insecurity for women reinforces patterns of social exclusion, especially for girls, and reduces food security, income generation and employment prospects.

Further, while countries remain committed to implementing the VGGT, the global community is not achieving change at the scale required to fulfil the ambitions of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Many countries have adopted new land legislations and policies, but they continue to struggle to implement these reforms. Very few countries have officially reported on the land SDG indicators: twenty-four on SDG 1.4.2, twenty-seven on SDG 5.a.1, thirty-five on SDG 5.a.2 (see also article on page 31), and only five on all three core land SDG indicators.

Taking advantage of momentum

The celebration of the VGGT’s tenth anniversary is a unique opportunity to achieve equitable land tenure and promote the required changes at scale to address the challenges mentioned above. First and foremost, all actors must reaffirm their commitment to promoting and supporting the VGGT and increasing mutual coordination and collaboration with a view to change and tenure

security for everyone. Here, FAO and many partners seek to raise the profile of the Global Land Agenda, taking concrete actions at global, regional, national and local levels within a common Framework for Action (F4A).

Moreover, an evidence-based assessment of the trends regarding land tenure and governance is required to help all stakeholders progress towards the SDGs and other frameworks, and to highlight challenges and best practices. Here, FAO and several partners will build a Global Land Observatory to generate evidence and data on the status of land tenure and governance, as a reference point for policy-makers, intergovernmental organisations, civil society, the private sector and academia, linking global and country initiatives in the frameworks of the SDGs, the VGGT, the F4A and the New Urban Agenda.

Changes and interactions between ecosystems have to be analysed to provide knowledge and technical guidance on aspects such as climate change, loss of biodiversity, land degradation and zoonotic diseases, and land tenure and uses. Here, FAO will expand corporate coordination to address land use planning and tenure rights, protected areas, landscape and biodiversity restoration, land, water and forestry conservation and management.

Mainstreaming the link between securing tenure rights and equitable access to land and inclusive rural transformation and poverty eradication will develop knowledge and strengthen partnerships and advocacy. It will also provide technical support and capacity development to women, youth, Indigenous Peoples, pastoralists, small-scale producers and the rural poor for access to natural resources and tenure rights.

Only if these key areas of action are addressed can inclusive, fair and secure ownership rights be achieved and progress made towards rural transformation leaving no-one behind.

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