

CFS Partners Event on Building Back Better: Confronting the Impact of COVID-19 on Land Tenure, Food Security and Nutrition

This session showcased the importance of diverse secure land tenure in assuring food security and nutrition in the COVID-19 recovery process. Looking ahead, land rights are at the centre of opportunities to ‘build back better’. Land rights are a foundational element to various pillars of sustainable development: more resilient local food systems; more equitable, labour and youth absorbing socio-economic models; more sustainable environmental management systems; and stronger local democracies - the essential components in achieving the 2030 SDG framework. The session also considered the implications for the Voluntary Guidelines on the Governance of Tenure in providing a framework to improve governance of tenure as a fundamental component for sustainable food systems.

More than 150 people participated in the session. Panelists representing a wide range of perspectives shared their views on the impacts of the COVID-19 crisis shared ideas of how to build back better and create resilient food and land governance systems. Panelists indicated that the COVID-19 crisis has exacerbated pressures on community land rights and land governance systems, though these pressures and challenges often existed before the crisis. The land community has already identified excellent tools and norms to strengthen land governance and center policy making and investment on the perspectives of rural communities. Now, more than ever, we need to turn theory into practice. Civil society and informed governments will be an important counter-weight to actors unmoved by sustainable approaches. We need to be politically savvy, drive strong and strategic messaging, and help all stakeholders to understand the importance of community-centered solutions and strong land governance—for climate solutions, food security, community livelihoods and self-determination, peace-building, and stable, rights-respecting investment environments.

Panelists made the following conclusions:

- The Pandemic has made us realize that we made less progress towards securing land rights at the national level than we had hoped. We must put the VGGT back at the center of political decision making on land.
- The tools and instruments to improve land governance are there. As we emerge from the crisis, it will be essential to make sure those tools are applied. What is decisive is the political will.
- It must become even clearer how essential land rights are to the achievement of “bigger issues”: resilient food systems and addressing the climate crisis. Without secure land rights we will not achieve the SDGs.
- We have seen that the Pandemic has triggered new risks. For instance, “policy grabbing,” which can be described as the passage of new land and investment laws without adequate democratic control. As we emerge from the Pandemic, further risks for tenure insecure communities may evolve as governments will aim to kick-start economies and attract further investments.

Francis Colee, Head of Programs and lead researcher at Green Advocates International in Liberia underscored that Liberia is a post-conflict country and that tendency for violence is

still very high, and that the country has not been able to secure the delicate balance between investment, environment and people. Francis introduced the notion of a Policy grab in favor of oil palm companies in which the Government of Liberia is trying to complete a key national consultation without the Free, Prior and Informed Consent of the communities whose ancestral lands are being cultivated or earmarked for large-scale oil palm concession. "Grabbing policy and land without the consent of the affected communities is NOT conflict sensitive, it deepens the violation of community rights and their abilities to secure sustainable livelihood," he said. "Our communities will wake up after COVID-19 and find their voices were not heard in the validation of a key policy document that will define the oil palm sector for generations and affect their control and management of their land."

The Covid-19 crisis has shown or exposed the weakness of the land rights of many farmers and communities and of land administration systems, said Javier Molina Cruz, Coordinator of the Land Tenure Unit, Partnership Division, of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO). "The VGGTs after eight years of being endorsed by the CFS, have shown how useful they are to secure tenure rights and improve governance of tenure. Thus, the CFS 47 in its next session in February 2021 should renew its support to the VGGT and encourage its membership to support their implementation," he said.

Data can be a powerful means to build back better, but access to information and data remains a challenge, said Laura Meggiolaro, Land Portal Team Leader. "Data infrastructure and disparities in data visibility, accessibility, consistency and completeness makes it difficult for researchers and practitioners in many countries to meaningfully engage with and use data," said Ms. Meggiolaro. "Land data, when it's well-governed and available for use by a wide range of actors, becomes a public good that contributes to informed decision making." Digital platforms can promote information and data sharing in a democratic inclusive way, creating a space where trust and agency are ensured, democratizing access to land information and creating an information environment people can trust in the process, she said.