

MAKING INFORMATION TRANSPARENT AND ACCESSIBLE



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SCIENCE FOR ACTION



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The Science for Action Series is jointly coordinated by the International Land Coalition (ILC) and the Global Land Programme (GLP). It brings together key findings from research networks relevant to ILC'S ten commitments to People-Centred Land Governance. The Series facilitates exchange of knowledge between scientists, civil society and grassroots organisations to strengthen efforts of land users, practitioners and policy-makers to bring about positive change in land governance.

This Brief refers to Commitment Eight: 'Ensure transparency and accountability, through unhindered and timely public access to all information that may contribute to informed public debate and decision-making on land issues at all stages, and through decentralisation to the lowest effective level, to facilitate participation, accountability and the identification of locally appropriate solutions.'

It is based on the research of the Centre for Development and Environment (CDE), the Land Matrix Initiative and the Stockholm Environment Institute.

Transparency is generally understood as openness and willingness to share information, and it is instrumental in building trust and reputation. In the context of people-centred land governance, transparency is understood more particularly as a state in which information is made apparent and readily available to certain actors, so that public debate and decision-making on land issues is fostered at all stages.

DEFINING TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

As a tool for accountability, transparency is neither inherently good or bad. The impact of increased transparency depends fundamentally on what information is being made transparent, how, to whom and for what purpose. Increased transparency is commonly assumed to favour more democratic modes of governance, identifying where power may need to be balanced in both production and consumer economies. But greater transparency can also exacerbate inequalities by further empowering the already powerful.¹

Transparency and accountability are central to achieving ILC'S goal of people-centred land governance. Specifically, in the context of international trade of land-based commodities, information transparency about agricultural supply chains can further justice and equity in land issues, owing to three important characteristics:

- The scale of global consumption has greatly transformed with local production and consumption being increasingly distant and disconnected from each other, thus undermining the ability of actors to shape their own environments and land use.
- It is often impossible to identify a distribution of responsibility, such that actors involved at every stage of the global supply chain share the responsibility of making systems more sustainable.
- We now live in a time of unprecedented access to information about how global supply chains are operating and with what impacts. This makes transparency of information a key tool for supporting new modes of just and sustainable land governance.

It is important to emphasise that transparency should not be viewed as a replacement for effective social and environmental governance, but rather as a support that strengthens its regulatory and empowerment functions.¹

UNDERSTANDING THE CONTEXT

Ensuring that commodity supply chain organisations provide clear and accurate information is critical. At every stage of the supply

Equally important is making this information easily accessible. Prioritising data transparency and holding suppliers accountable for both the accuracy and accessibility of their data is key to

Through cooperation, communication and information exchanges with private sector stakeholders as well as governments, CSOs working to improve transparency and accountability can help build positive working relationships with some of the major players, educating about, and influencing, effective policies

chain, transparency on key issues - such as labour practices, animal welfare, product ingredients and fairness in the use of land and natural resources - is crucial. These are a key part of securing equity in land matters and achieving more sustainable and just global production and consumption.

creating a level playing field for all stakeholders, regardless of size. This also strengthens the work of land and environmental defenders (LEDs) in advocating for land rights, providing them with a solid, evidence-based foundation for their work.²



FACING CHALLENGES

OWNERSHIP OF INFORMATION

A major challenge to transparency is the prevalence of 'top down' data collection approaches. In agricultural supply chains, for example, much information comes from official government statistics and publicly available company data, and little information on the distribution of impacts along the supply chain.¹ Large scale land acquisitions (LSLAs) present a similar challenge. Recent research shows few deals and countries provide key information aligned with the Voluntary Guidelines for the Responsible Governance of Tenure (VGGT), with most countries providing just 5% to 20%.³

MESSY OR UNAVAILABLE DATA

For data to be truly usable it must be curated and presented in a clear, understandable manner. Data released without highlighting key trends or that is excessively voluminous can overwhelm or paralyse those seeking information. In some cases, companies may deliberately release disorganised or overly complex data. When data cannot be easily understood, it undermines accountability.

LACK OF FOCUS ON LOCAL COMMUNITIES

The poor quality of information on LSLAs, particularly on their local impacts, makes it challenging to assess and mitigate negative effects.⁴ When data initiatives are driven by corporate stakeholders, appealing to

sustainability-conscious consumers overrides the needs of local communities and/or stakeholders.¹

CORRUPTION

Corporate stakeholders often benefit from international treaties, and enjoy more secure land tenure rights than local actors.⁵ Lack of transparency allows any violations of international environmental or human rights agreements to go unnoticed and unaddressed. Governments often embed reliance on extractive industries into their policies, prioritising these sectors at the expense of local communities, whose livelihoods depend on production uses of the same lands. Those most affected by severe impacts of deforestation, for instance, are often the least able or empowered to influence national or local laws, or to hold foreign investors accountable.⁶

FINDING SOLUTIONS

WIDEN ACCESS TO ACCURATE INFORMATION

Expanding access to reliable, timely data is critical to advancing sustainable production processes. Public transparency can create public pressure, empowering state agencies that otherwise lack the capacity to enforce regulations and uphold land rights. Public accountability, such as monitoring and holding private actors accountable, can strengthen weak state agencies.¹ Local communities possess context-specific environmental knowledge that can be overlooked when data is standardised solely around large-scale indicators.



This broader approach ensures that data remains relevant and transparent for small-scale, local stakeholders.⁷

Civil society organisations (CSOs) can help play a role by developing Application Programming Interfaces (APIs) for research databases so different data initiatives can speak to each other; supporting the creation of common data repositories, rather than new platforms; submitting Freedom of Information requests to governments to enhance access to key datasets; advocating for new datasets to be open-access and stored in open-access repositories.

COLLABORATIVE APPROACHES

The future of land data lies in collaboration, building data 'ecosystems' that serve as tools for accountability across multiple scales, and involve shared responsibility. A notable example is the Land Matrix Initiative, a global observatory that has tracked Large-Scale Land Acquisitions (LSLAs) since 2000.⁸ By integrating data from media, researchers, local practitioners and official sources, it enhances transparency in land transactions. In specific sectors, such as the forestry industries of Liberia and Sierra Leone, such collaborations greatly improve public access to information on land transactions.

However, collaborative data ecosystems face structural challenges. Investment guidelines are still mostly voluntary, and because these tools can drive impactful and informed actions, they often come under scrutiny.^{9,10} Recent research has highlighted the current obsession with quantitative data, for example, as a narrowing, rather than expansion, of understanding.¹¹ The real challenge is not just producing information, but in effectively linking knowledge to action.¹²

BUILD TRUST

It is important to involve neutral and independent third parties in the curation, analysis and dissemination of data to engender trust from stakeholders throughout the supply chain.¹ CSOs can lead these efforts by collaborating to create shared datasets and adopting common standards.

REGULATORY MEASURES

Numerous guidelines, such as the Principles for Responsible Investment in Agriculture and Food



Systems of the Committee on World Food Security (CFS) and the OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises, are designed to support transparent and accessible production processes.⁹ But building trust requires that regulatory measures are also effectively implemented and enforced. Tools like fines, embargos and subsidies can provide incentives for suppliers to provide accurate and verifiable information about their production practices.¹ Consumer demand for transparency and sustainable land use can help push for improved standards.^{1,7} ►



Photo credit: Ryan Woo/CIFOR

and transparency is to increase knowledge at a local level, for instance about land rights and the legal options available to small-holders, communities and other minority groups. Equally important is raising awareness at a national level, through educating key figures within the media and government. These players as well as other key stakeholders can prove to be valuable allies in helping to promote and push greater transparency and accountability.

SUPPORTING SYSTEMATIC LAND MONITORING AND IMPARTIAL DATA ANALYSIS

CSOs can build platforms to organise and disseminate data, evidence and analyses. This can support transparency about source data and inclusion of local communities in collaborations across scales, which are imperative parts of building trust and parity between actors.

ACTING AS INTERMEDIARIES BETWEEN LOCAL COMMUNITIES, THE PRIVATE SECTOR AND GOVERNMENTS

Through cooperation, communication and information exchanges with private sector stakeholders and governments, CSOs working to improve transparency and accountability can help build positive working relationships with some of the major players, educating about, and influencing, effective policies. Promoting openness and acting as intermediaries in supporting and promoting the various stakeholder groups can go a long way towards encouraging greater transparency and accountability in land governance. ●

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

CSOs have a major role to play in supporting transformation on local, national and international levels. Below are some examples of effective actions they can take.

RAISING AWARENESS THROUGH EDUCATION

One of the key steps to supporting accountability

LOCAL SOLUTIONS TO PROVIDING ACCURATE INFORMATION

The Senegal National Land Observatory (NLO) collates all domestic and cross-border agricultural, forestry, mining, ranching and livestock transactions in the country since 2000.⁸ It increases the transparency of LSLAs by recording deals over 50 hectares, and leverages existing multi-stakeholder platforms to provide opportunities for sharing information and facilitating discussion between stakeholders. The NLO pursues an inclusive policy, operating under the principle that involving local partners in the collation, management and analysis of the data collected will ensure that the information generated is accessible to all.⁹

As another example, Indonesia is one of the world's largest producers of palm oil, and has therefore been targeted by foreign investors. Since 2000, the Land Matrix Initiative has recorded 157 deals (of a total of 179) covering over 3.5 million hectares (of a total of 4.1 million).⁹ This contributed to the Indonesian government's decision in 2018 to issue a three-year moratorium on new palm oil concessions, halting new land deals within defined areas and reassessing existing permits.



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LAND MATRIX INITIATIVE

The Land Matrix Initiative aims to address the lack of transparency and availability of robust data, and support the position of less powerful actors within the processes that regulate access and rights to land.^{4,8} As a global partnership it collects, provides and analyses information on large-scale land acquisition via its network of global and regional partners.

The Land Matrix Initiative holds detailed information that covers sales, leases, concessions, resource exploitation permits and contract farming at a national level. The data provided is of a high quality that has been verified by multiple sources, including experts, government officials and CSOs. Of this data, 80% of reported deals are based on two or more sources, while 40% of reporting is based on between two and seven sources.⁴

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This brief is based on the following research and articles used in consultation with the authors:

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We would like to thank Markus Giger (CDE), Jérémy Bourgoin and coauthors (ILC/CIRAD) and Toby Gardner (Stockholm Environment Institute) for their contribution.

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For a full list of references please refer to the Annex - [End Notes](#)

Science for Action is a jointly coordinated series of ILC and GLP, gathering key research findings on land governance and land science from researchers in their networks.



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DOI: XXX

GLP [Global Land Programme], ILC [International Land Coalition]. (2025). Making information transparent and accessible, Science for Action Series No. 8. Rome, Italy and Bern, Switzerland: ILC and GLP/Centre for Development and Environment, University of Bern. DOI LINK XXX.

This brief is based on the research of the CDE, Land Matrix Initiative and the Stockholm Environment Institute.



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