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LAND TENURE AND FOOD SECURITY

There is a growing body of evidence suggesting that securing land and resource rights for men and women has a positive impact on food security and broader development outcomes, such as household investment, agricultural productivity, women’s empowerment, nutrition, and more robust rental markets for farmland. The existing literature highlighting the positive impact of strengthened land tenure on food security outcomes is discussed below.

LAND RIGHTS, HOUSEHOLD INVESTMENTS, AND AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTIVITY:

Secure land and resource rights provide positive incentives to invest in and conserve valuable resources, including land, pastures, and forests. Conversely, when these rights are insecure, people have more limited incentives to invest labor and capital to improve soil, plant perennial crops, manage rangelands, and invest in irrigation. The relationship between tenure security and land-related agricultural investment is widely documented.¹

- **When land rights are secure, farmers invest more in their land and agricultural productivity improves.** In Thailand, land titling increased investment, input use, and yields.² In Ethiopia, land certification led to land productivity increases of 40 to 45 percent in the Tigray Region, and soil and water conservation investments rose by 30 percent in the Amhara Region.³ In Rwanda, investment doubled in farmers’ soil conservation.⁴ In rural Benin, communities that participated in a process to map and recognize land rights, were 39 to 43 percent more likely to shift their crop investments from subsistence to long-term and perennial cash crops, and tree planting.⁵ Additional studies from Nicaragua, Peru, Cambodia, and Vietnam found statistically significant effects of land titling interventions on agricultural investment and productivity.⁶
- **When land rights are insecure, investment, productivity, and yields fall.** In Uganda, when plot ownership and control was disputed, yields were 20 percent lower; with eviction risk, yields were 37 percent lower.⁷ In Burkina Faso, productivity dropped 40 percent when households had concerns regarding land disputes.⁸ In Malawi, the probability of investing in conservation was approximately 14 percent lower on informally rented plots where tenure was less secure than on inherited or purchased plots.⁹

In Ethiopia, land certification led to productivity increases of 40-45 percent in the Tigray Region

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- **When land rights are secure, household participation in land markets increases.** Research has shown that better functioning land markets—including rental markets—positively impact agricultural productivity and food security by allocating land more efficiently to the most productive users and allowing less productive farmers to migrate or work in other sectors. In Ethiopia, household land certification increased participation in the leasing and amount of land rented out.¹⁰ Another study from Ethiopia found that female-headed households with access to formal land rights are more likely to engage in land rental activities as landlords.¹¹ In the Dominican Republic, insecure property rights decreased land rental activity. The same study suggests that improving tenure security would increase the total area rented to the poor by 63 percent.¹²

WOMEN’S LAND RIGHTS AND FOOD SECURITY: Women make up approximately 43 percent of the agricultural labor force and produce a significant portion of the food grown in the developing world. While land is the most important resource for those dependent on agriculture for their livelihoods, women consistently have less access to land than men, and women’s land rights are less secure. At the same time, research shows that if women had the same access to resources for

If women had the same access to resources as men, it could decrease the number of undernourished people in the world by 12–17 percent

agricultural production as men, they could increase yields on their farms by 20 to 30 percent; this could raise total agricultural output in developing countries by 2.5 to 4 percent, and in turn reduce the number of undernourished people in the world by 12 to 17 percent.¹³ This and other evidence supports the global consensus that closing the gender gap in secure access to land for women is fundamental to food security and women’s empowerment.¹⁴

- **When women have secure land rights, agricultural investment and production increase.** In Rwanda, women whose land rights were formalized were 19 percent more likely to engage in soil conservation, compared to 10 percent among men.¹⁵ In rural Benin, women were historically unlikely to invest in soil fertility by leaving their land fallow; but this gender gap disappeared in communities where female-headed households mapped and documented their parcel boundaries. In these communities, female-headed households were just as likely as male-headed households to leave their land fallow.¹⁶ Gender-sensitive allocation of micro-gardens in India increased use of credit and inputs like fertilizer.¹⁷ In Ethiopia, land certification led to increased productivity on plots owned by women.¹⁸
- **When women have secure access to land, nutrition outcomes improve.** In Ethiopia, an increase in land allocated to women decreased household food insecurity by 36 percent.¹⁹ Studies from Nicaragua and Honduras have found that increases in female landholdings are associated with increases in household food expenditure and child educational attainment.²⁰ In Vietnam, children in households where women own land are up to 10 percent less likely to be sick.²¹ In Nepal, in households where women own land, children are 33 percent less likely to be severely underweight.²²

LAND RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBLE AGRICULTURAL INVESTMENT:²³ The global imperative to improve food security and promote economic development is driving some countries to actively support investment in large-scale commercial agricultural production. However, evidence suggests that there is no one “right” model for agricultural development. In some contexts small-scale farmers may be as efficient as larger-scale producers. In other cases, larger-scale commercial production

may be common, especially in areas where people can buy and sell land with assurance that their contracts will be impartially enforced.

However, research suggests that large-scale acquisitions of agricultural land in countries where land markets are constrained and the rights of small-scale producers are insecure can lead to harmful effects on local livelihoods. At the same time, companies may face reputational, financial, and operational risks in markets where land rights are undocumented or land governance is weak. [The Munden Project \(2012\) quantifies these costs to investors](#).²⁴ Taking time to get investments right can yield sustained, positive outcomes in food production and safeguard the property rights of local communities. See USAID's [Operational Guidelines for Responsible Land-Based Investment](#) for more information.²⁵

USAID'S LAND AND FOOD SECURITY PROGRAMMING PAST AND PRESENT: For decades, USAID has supported coordinated policies and programs that clarify and strengthen land tenure and property rights as a way to increase food security and spur agricultural investment. From supporting legal and policy reforms that improve women's land rights, to developing and testing mobile applications to secure tenure, to supporting public-private partnerships for responsible land-based investment, USAID is working through multiple channels to address the complex set of issues around tenure and food security in 14 countries and at the global policy level in support of the goals of the U.S. Government's global hunger and food security initiative, Feed the Future.

- In Tajikistan, a [Feed the Future project](#) is supporting land policy reforms and legal aid clinics that focus on strengthening women's property rights and restructuring farms to develop a robust market in land use rights.²⁶
- In Tanzania, another [Feed the Future project](#) is scaling a pilot program that uses a low-cost mobile application to clarify and document the rights of smallholder farmers, providing them formal land documentation—for the first time—and allowing women to register their land.²⁷
- In Ethiopia, USAID is [supporting communal certification](#) of pastoral land rights, as well as strengthening pastoral communities' capacity for land use planning and management and investment negotiations.²⁸ This program builds on the successes of [a series of USAID-supported land certification programs](#) that issued half a million land use rights certificates between 2005 and 2013, including 130,000 joint certificates for married couples and over 70,000 individual certificates for women-headed households.
- At the global policy level, USAID is actively supporting implementation of international mechanisms like the [Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure](#) (VGGT)²⁹ and the [Principles for Responsible Investment in Agriculture and Food Systems](#) (RAI)³⁰ that prioritize respecting and protecting tenure rights—particularly for women and other vulnerable populations—in the context of agricultural investments and national food security strategies.
- In 2017, USAID will support a series of public-private partnerships for responsible land-based investment to “road test” and share lessons from the New Alliance for Food Security and Nutrition's [Analytical Framework for Land-Based Agricultural Investments](#)³¹ and other related guidance.

As a result of these programs and others, since 2013, more than 140,000 households have received formal documentation of their land rights, 18 laws or policies have been adopted that strengthen land rights, more than 87,000 people have been trained on land tenure, and 182 million people are able to benefit from laws and policies adopted that strengthen land rights.

For more information, visit: www.land-links.org/issue/food-security/

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