

GLOBAL MAP OF INDIGENOUS & LOCAL COMMUNITY LANDS

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CHALLENGE

Community-held land and natural resources lie at the heart of social, political, and economic life in much of rural Africa, Latin America, Asia, and elsewhere. For rural communities and indigenous peoples, they represent fundamental assets—primary sources of livelihood, nutrition, income, wealth, and employment—and are a basis for security, status, social identity, and political relations. Land and resources also have historical, cultural, and spiritual significance for many rural men and women.

Many governments in Africa, Asia, and Latin America acknowledge customary or community tenure rights to lands, but few have established the strong legal protections needed to secure community tenure over land. As a consequence, many communities throughout the world have lost access to critical natural resources, or lost their land entirely, triggering resource-related conflicts and threatening livelihoods. Evidence shows that people who are involuntarily displaced often fall into poverty even when compensated for their losses. Furthermore, those who remain on their land are in constant fear of being displaced.

Today, more communities are taking action to protect their lands. Some, primarily in Africa, have successfully lobbied for legal change providing blanket national protection for unregistered community-based rights. While this is helpful, communities still need to double-lock their rights in mapped and titled areas. Some communities are mapping their land as a first step to formal registration, others are submitting paperwork to obtain a land title or deed, others are filing petitions to have their concerns heard in court, and still others are taking to the streets to voice their demands.

These and other actions are having profound social, economic, and political consequences. Weak government land administration systems are unable to keep up with the demand for documentation, including surveying plots and community lands. Courts are distrusted as expensive, corrupt, and unreliable with many land disputes taking years to resolve. Especially where community land rights are still not accepted as existing or deserving of protection, civil unrest and violent conflicts have been fuelled. This also contributes to poor country credit ratings and low investor confidence.

Interest in land is increasing globally, often with significant and adverse effects on local wellbeing and the environment, including ecosystem services and

biodiversity. Companies with current or future land-based investments in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and elsewhere now face substantial risks as they seldom have a good understanding of competing customary or indigenous claims to the land. Weak land registries make it difficult, if not impossible, to accurately determine land and natural resource rights over an area. In some parts of the world, governments have begun parceling out community-held lands in order to “boost” the land market and allow private interests to buy up what were once community-held lands. As a result, many companies now hold contested land and are paying the price. The costs to companies of dealing with disputed land and natural resource rights can be significant, and as more rural people learn of their rights and advocate to hold onto their lands, the costs to companies will escalate.

OPPORTUNITY

New information and communication technologies are providing opportunities to address these challenges and help secure land rights. Communities and their partners around the world are using inexpensive Global Positioning Systems (GPS) and other devices to map their land with great precision. Many have effectively used these maps to protect their land from external threats. And as more investors seek to acquire land, many communities want to share their maps with the public to let everyone know of their land claims, and proclaim, “We are here!”

Governments and civil society organizations are also preparing national maps of community lands. A growing number are developing online platforms, such as the



online map of indigenous territories in Indonesia by *Aliansi Masyarakat Adat Nusantara* (AMAN), the interactive map of indigenous territories and community lands in the Amazon Basin by *Red Amazónica de Información Socioambiental Georreferenciada* (RAISG), and the *MappingForRights* platform of local community and indigenous lands in Central Africa by the Rainforest Foundation United Kingdom (RFUK).

There is both an opportunity and an urgent need to establish an online, interactive Global Map of Indigenous and Local Community Lands. Such a global map can empower rural people and strengthen land tenure, encouraging them to make new investments to improve land and natural resource management that increase productivity and reduce local poverty. A global map can also support open governments and promote responsible private sector investments. More specifically, a global map can:

- Enable indigenous peoples and local communities to build a global picture of their populations and lands, supporting their engagement with one another and increasing their visibility to governments, corporations, and other actors.
- Put the issue of community land rights on the global agenda in a visible way, letting the world know of land claims and allowing communities to be proactive in asserting their rights rather than reactive to threats.
- Prompt governments to recognize community land rights, enabling advocates and public officials to compare situations at the national level and encourage action based on the examples of others.
- Promote government transparency and accountability by helping guide land use management in ways that respect human rights and boost local livelihoods, and challenging global paradigms, such as wildlife conservation and large-scale land acquisition.
- Prompt changes in corporate behavior and action in identifying lands for investments, reducing company risks and costs by respecting local land and natural resource rights.
- Inform development assistance agency decisions and help them better target their resources and technical assistance.

OFFER

In February 2014, the *Instituto del Bien Común* (IBC) in Peru, International Land Coalition (ILC) in Italy, and World Resources Institute (WRI) convened a small group of organizations in Rome, Italy, to discuss objectives and options for establishing a *Global Map of Indigenous and Local Community Lands*. In addition to the co-organizers, participating groups included: AMAN, Foundation for Ecological Security (FES) in India, Philippine Association for Intercultural Development (PAFID), Forest Peoples Programme (FPP), RFUK, Rights and Resources Initiative (RRI), and Liz Alden Wily, independent land tenure specialist. The meeting built on discussions initiated in the “Mapping & Documentation” sessions of the September 2013 international conference—*Scaling-Up Global Efforts to Securing Community Land and Resource Rights*—in Interlaken, Switzerland, convened by RRI, ILC, and Oxfam.

Discussions in Rome centered on: 1) the added value of a global map (in relation to national and regional platforms) and how to ensure that this global orientation provides concrete benefits to communities; 2) the range of protocols needed to ensure consistency of data, presentation and messaging on the global map, such as a typology of community lands and data sharing; and 3) the establishment of a “Steering Group” co-chaired by IBC and WRI, to develop the *Global Map of Indigenous and Local Community Lands*.

The participants also identified a number of activities to be conducted in the next few months, including:

- Define the composition of the Steering Group and identify new members
- Develop a typology of community lands for the global map
- Establish data sharing and attribution protocols that maintain security of community lands data
- Continue to collect maps and other information on community lands
- Begin developing select data layers, such as the percent of national land held by communities
- Discuss the design and functionality of the global map with technical experts

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