

Vision and Agenda for Securing Land Rights to Advance the Global Sustainable Development Goals

3 October 2017 | Stockholm

The Interlaken Group is a network of leaders from companies, civil society organizations, Indigenous Peoples organizations, and public and private investors who are focused on expanding and leveraging private sector action to secure community land rights.

To achieve the Sustainable Development Goals of ending poverty and hunger, advancing gender equality, reducing inequality, as well as confronting climate change, reducing conflict, and conserving forests and ecosystems, more concerted and coordinated action is needed. Securing community rights to their lands and natural resources, and respecting their broader set of human rights, is key to making progress on each of these Goals. To ensure that no one is left behind, particular effort is required to secure the rights of Indigenous Peoples and women, who are often the most marginalized in rural societies.

Today, nearly a third of the world's population lacks secure rights to the lands and forests they customarily claim and have historically used and protected. These Indigenous Peoples and rural communities customarily own and manage more than half the world's lands and forests. Inadequate recognition of land rights and constraints on the ability of communities to effectively exercise their rights endangers the livelihoods and survival of communities and thus puts at risk the sustained protection of the natural resources, forests, and waters we all depend on for human development and global environmental sustainability. The lack of recognition and support also makes these lands and forests vulnerable to unregulated exploitation, feeding corruption. By contrast, communities and Indigenous Peoples with secure rights to their forests and lands have lower rates of deforestation and degradation and, by protecting their forests and lands help protect our climate.

These challenges are particularly acute for women. Despite facing historic injustice in both security of land rights and land governance, they are increasingly becoming the leading managers and political defenders of forests and lands across the world. This means that advancing the equal rights and voice of women is not only a global imperative for gender justice and women's socioeconomic advancement, but is also one of the most promising paths to protect forests and rural landscapes as well as advance inclusive development and social stability.

Secure land rights have been a cornerstone of social, economic, and environmental stability as well as equitable economic progress for centuries, providing the foundation underpinning the development of democracy, sustained peace, and shared prosperity across many parts of the world. Today, securing the rights and livelihoods of communities, especially of women in communities, and of Indigenous Peoples constitutes one of the most pressing and necessary steps to achieving global progress toward sustainable and equitable development.

There has been growing global commitment in recent years to address insecure community land rights—demonstrated by the endorsement of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), which celebrated its 10th year anniversary in September 2017; the Committee on Food Security's Voluntary Guidelines for the Responsible Governance of Tenure (VGGT), endorsed in 2012; and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), endorsed in 2015. Securing Indigenous Peoples' and communities' land rights is also recognized as a strategy within the New York Declaration on Forests in 2014; and the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) agreement in Paris in 2015. More than 600 organizations and communities worldwide have endorsed the Global Call to Action on Indigenous and Community Land Rights, launched in 2015. International human rights treaties, alongside recent decisions of regional human rights bodies such as the May 2017 Ogiek decision of the African Court of Human and Peoples' Rights, further reinforce these commitments.

This progress is due primarily to the leadership and courage of Indigenous Peoples and local communities, who though facing considerable ongoing challenges, are increasingly recognized and empowered as the leading defenders of forests and natural resources. This progress on the international policy front has been met by important gains in recent years in many countries, with a growing number of governments advancing new land policies and legal frameworks. Leading corporations and investors are also adjusting their investment practices and business operations. And the international community is developing new initiatives to provide support to advance and accelerate the implementation of these commitments. There is also an emerging suite of international instruments that permit the scaling-up of international effort, including new funding mechanisms, new networks to engage investors and companies, platforms to facilitate strategic coordination, and ambitious campaigns to raise awareness and achieve impact.

While these positive steps are promising, they remain insufficient to address the global challenges we now face. More is needed from all parties, including companies, governments, investors, international development institutions, Indigenous Peoples, communities, and civil society to actually scale-up and implement the commitments on the ground. Without greater global effort and coordination, the opportunity to make real progress toward the SDGs, climate commitments, and global peace and prosperity will be missed, and windows of opportunity to secure communities' remaining lands, forests, and waters will be lost.

This vision and agenda aims to reinforce awareness and scale-up global efforts to advance the implementation of commitments to secure collective land rights on the ground, and thereby help achieve the SDGs.

The Interlaken Group thus urges all actors in the global community to encourage governments, companies, investors, civil society, international organizations, and NGOs to:

1. Scale-up efforts to secure community land rights and strengthen communities' ability to exercise their rights and govern and manage their lands and forests, with a focus on the particular needs of Indigenous Peoples and women, by implementing the VGGT and UNDRIP, and also champion the central role of secure community land rights in all relevant fora—toward ensuring implementation of the SDGs, the NYDF, and the Paris Climate Agreement;
2. Fulfill their respective obligations to implement Free, Prior, and Informed Consent protocols in advance of the allocation or approval of any such uses of lands set aside for forest protection, new public conservation areas, or large land concessions, and otherwise fully respect Indigenous Peoples' and communities' rights, especially women's rights within communities, per the VGGT, UNDRIP, and the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women;
3. Acknowledge and fairly address legacy land issues in existing enterprise concessions and conservation areas, and promote community-led development plans and enterprises;
4. Increase support to existing instruments and initiatives by increasing investments that secure land rights, and enhance coordination and collaboration between all stakeholders to optimize efficiency, leverage, and impact to the benefit first of communities, as well as of companies and governments; and
5. Improve coordination and collaboration to support the above agenda; monitor global progress on secure tenure rights for rural communities, Indigenous Peoples, and women within those communities using established baselines; and regularly report on progress to the development community in all relevant fora, including the UN High Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development, the Committee on Food Security, and the Framework Convention on Climate Change.