



LAND

Fundamental to survival and a resource for rural development

Abstract

Land is used in many different ways: for forestry, agriculture and grazing as well as for settlements and infrastructure. It comprises important natural habitats and mineral resources. The pressure on land has increased enormously, leading to conflicts of interest. In order to avoid conflicts and settle them peaceably, it is essential that participative, future-oriented land use planning be established under the authority of the state. In this process, land rights – including traditional rights – must be taken into account.

On the basis of proper planning, targets for different forms of land use can be formulated. In the context of rural development, agriculture is the main issue. People's sustainable food security and right to food must have priority. At the same time, soil fertility must be maintained or improved, natural reserves must be protected and the sealing of fertile land minimised.

Investments in land and land use policy must be in harmony with the right to food. People must be supported in dealing with land ownership issues and the management of conflicts over land. At the political level, commitment to the creation and implementation of internationally accepted guidelines is a significant factor in supporting poverty-oriented access to land and other natural resources.

Land has more than one essential function for rural development. The primary function is the economic dimension, which includes the production of food, feed and industrial or energy crops, as well as forestry products. However, the way in which these crops are grown is relevant. A wide range of socio-economic factors results in very diverse farming systems, with different effects on land. Wrong cultivation practices can result in loss of agricultural land; investment in irrigation or drainage systems, terracing and erosion protection can improve land, making it more productive. The most important target is to maintain soil fertility (cf. Section 1 on agriculture).

Important socio-economic functions of land relate to property rights and land-use rights. These are building assets and constitute a certain level of social security. In many cases, land use rights – particularly traditional rights – are not sufficiently recorded, registered and certified, or they contradict modern land rights. Secure, poverty-oriented access to land is, however, an essential factor in food security and in realising the right to food. In this context, customary law must also be taken into account. Women are often particularly disadvantaged in their access to land (cf. Section 7 on gender equality). Land use rights of indigenous communities are often undocumented or insufficiently documented. However, distribution of property titles is not always an adequate solution to providing poverty-oriented access to land; during the title-giving process marginalised population groups are often disadvantaged. Hunter-gatherer societies or pastoralists do not require titles to land, but recognition of their user rights.

Unused arable land is virtually nonexistent today, and continuing to turn forest areas into arable land is often considered an unacceptable alternative. The rising demand for agricultural land is causing an increase in conflicts over an increasingly valuable resource. On the one hand, division and fragmentation of arable land is observed, mainly due to population growth and unfavourable inheritance rules (equal division of land among inheritors). At the same time, marginal land and land which cannot be mechanically cultivated is losing value. On the other hand, there is a trend towards concentration of property in the hands of a few financially solvent investors who buy large fertile areas or lease them long-term. Such investors often benefit from the fact that property and user rights are often insufficiently clear in the target country or that public authorities and local elites allocate areas arbitrarily. This often leads to so-called land grabbing. In some cases, problems arise from the incompatibility between modern and traditional land use policy. Corruption is frequently massive in relation to land allocation. Considering the increasing potential for conflict, it is necessary to give food security for the local population priority over secondary interests such as maximising profits or earning foreign currency.

Pressure on the resource land is also increasing from growth of the national economy. Cities are growing rapidly all over the world, hence there is a need to balance the interests of urban and rural populations. Efforts should be made to ensure that the loss of agricultural land is avoided as far as possible. This also applies to constructing infrastructure, in particular large dams or industrial parks.

In social and cultural terms, land also unites a range of functions: land rights and land use often reflect the development stage and the power structure of a rural society. It reflects the relative status of the various groups. Poverty-oriented, participative and socially balanced land use planning is a precondition for the peaceful coexistence of people and their various forms of land use. Only if all those involved are able to participate in the process can conflicts be identified and worked on in advance. Special attention must be paid to the food security of particularly vulnerable and marginalised groups.

Finally, land fulfils basic environmental services. Natural reserves are habitats for a diversity of biological life. It is important to maintain the soil's natural functions – primarily protecting biodiversity and storing nutrients and water, thus preserving soil fertility (cf. Section 10 on water). There is also a range of functional links between soils and the climate, which should be taken into account in land use planning. Intact soils can store CO₂ whereas degraded land has lost this function (cf. Section 14 on climate change). For all these reasons it is essential to use natural resource land in an economically, socially, culturally and ecologically sustainable way.

Welthungerhilfe's involvement in relation to access to land:

Focusing project support on maintaining soil fertility and sustainable use of soils – in particular by supporting measures to protect natural resources and promote the sustainable use of soils.

Supporting environmentally friendly methods of reclamation and melioration of unused land.

Supporting efforts to avoid and to solve land (use) conflicts.

Promoting legal advice and raising awareness; in particular, promoting women's rights and access to land.

Help rural poor affected by land ownership conflicts to secure land rights, and if necessary, improve their access to land.

Supporting programmes to ensure the livelihoods of people living in and on the fringes (buffer zones) of nature reserves.

Supporting the political work of our partners in the South on land rights issues and supporting victims of land grabbing.

Welthungerhilfe's demands in relation to access to land:

Developing countries need poverty-oriented participative land use planning in order to balance the diverse user interests and to prevent possible conflicts.

Governments must enforce national regulations on land rights based on the "Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests".

Governments of developing countries – with the support of international donors – should establish land registers and ensure transparency and reliability in granting land ownership.

Land investments and land use planning should be undertaken in such a way that they have sustainable positive effects on rural development and poverty reduction and are compatible with the right to food.

Maintenance of soil fertility should be given priority over short-term business interests.

Land reform should ensure that poorer sections of the population and in particular women are granted more equitable access to land and that the special situations of indigenous communities are taken into account.

Developing countries must set up and implement laws and guidelines for promoting poverty-oriented access to land.

This section is an excerpt of the WHH Position Paper Rural Development. Please also consult all other sections at www.welthungerhilfe.org/position-paper-rural-development

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