

# Land Is Life: Advancing SDG 15 through Tenure Security and Participation in Laos

Jan SCHULZ, Germany, Lorenz JENNI, Switzerland

**Key words:** SDG 15 “Land is Life”, Land Governance, Systematic Land Registration, FPIC, Laos.

## 1. SUMMARY

Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) – in particular SDG 15: Life on Land, which calls for the protection, restoration, and sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems – requires governance systems that secure tenure rights, promote equity, and empower local communities. The Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure (VGGT) provide a global framework for this purpose, emphasizing transparency, participation, and non-discrimination in land governance. Translating these principles into practice, the KfW-financed Land Management Project Laos (LMPL) integrates the principle of Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) into the country’s Systematic Land Registration (SLR) process to make land governance more inclusive, participatory, and socially legitimate.

A cornerstone of the developed approach is an awareness-raising methodology that ensures communities – particularly vulnerable and marginalized groups such as ethnic minorities and women – can make informed and voluntary decisions regarding land registration. Awareness activities are designed as participatory dialogues rather than one-way communication, using local languages, culturally adapted approaches, and visual materials to enable understanding across diverse literacy levels. These sessions create safe spaces for collective reflection, discussion, and internal decision-making before consent is sought, thereby strengthening both social cohesion and local ownership.

To ensure this process is meaningful, LMPL established Community Engagement and Awareness Teams, comprising district officials, civil society organizations, and members of mass organisations such as the Lao Women’s Union. Through targeted capacity-building and trainings, these teams learn to apply FPIC principles in practice – addressing power dynamics, land disputes, gender inequality, and ethnic diversity in village contexts. Training modules cover inclusive facilitation, environmental and social safeguards, conflict management, and the Do No Harm-approach, building empathy and accountability within local government institutions.

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## **2. WHY SECURE LAND RIGHTS MATTER FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT^**

Pressure on land is increasing worldwide: population growth, infrastructure projects, large-scale agriculture, raw material extraction, urbanisation, and deforestation contribute to damaging soils and ecosystems. Human-induced climate change is exacerbating the situation. Droughts, floods, heat waves, and other extreme weather events are rendering fertile land unusable and threatening the livelihoods of many people, especially vulnerable and marginalized people. This undermines the progress made in recent years in poverty reduction and jeopardises the development goals of the international community.

Sustainable Development Goal 15 calls for the protection of land and ecosystems (“Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss”). Goal 15 is closely linked to most of the other sustainable development goals, for instance Goal 1 “No Poverty”, Goal 2 “Zero Hunger”, Goal 3 “Good Health and Well-Being”, Goal 5 “Gender Equality”, Goal 6 “Clean Water and Sanitation”, Goal 7 “Affordable and Clean Energy”, Goal 10 “Reduced Inequalities”, Goal 12 “Responsible Consumption and Production”, Goal 13 “Climate Action” or Goal 16 “Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions”. Land is a fundamental resource, and addressing land-related challenges is crucial to achieving many of the development goals.

As land is not only the economic but also the cultural and social basis of many communities, land-related projects affect the livelihoods of these communities severely. Indigenous peoples in particular have a close relationship with their land – it not only secures their food supply but also shapes their cultural and spiritual traditions. For many communities, whether Indigenous, ethnic groups or smallholder peasants, land is a central part of their identity.

But this basis of life is increasingly under threat. The global interdependence of local environmental conditions and the planetary ecosystem is becoming increasingly apparent as critical tipping points are exceeded (Lenton et al., 2025). It is therefore crucial to protect the land rights of local communities, especially in rural and forested regions. Studies show that areas with secure land rights for Indigenous and ethnic communities have lower deforestation rates. Local communities often manage their land sustainably and protect biodiversity, drawing on traditional knowledge. With secure land rights, they are better able to defend themselves against land grabbing, environmental destruction, and land- and resource-based conflicts. Since land is the basis for food security and secure land rights promote investment in sustainable

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management, the rights of Indigenous peoples, smallholders, minorities, and landless groups must be strengthened. This not only contributes to the protection of land and life (SDG 15) but also supports the achievement of all other development goals.

### **3. WHY SECURE LAND RIGHTS MATTER FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT**

#### **3.1 Development Dynamics and Increasing Pressure on Land**

The global dynamics driving pressure on land and natural resources are particularly evident in the Southeast Asian state of Laos, where growing development demands, environmental transformations, and ongoing uncertainty about land use rights are having an acute combined effect.

Although the small, landlocked country has made measurable economic progress over the past two decades, it continues to be classified as one of the least developed countries and is currently one of only eight countries in Asia that remain in this category worldwide (CPD, 2024). Laos has a population of around eight million people and is governed under a socialist one-party system. Political power is therefore highly centralized and public participation remains limited; at the same time, political authority and policies show an openness towards a development model centered on investment promotion, aiming at attracting foreign investment, particularly in hydropower, mining, agriculture, and infrastructure. By granting land concessions and promoting large-scale projects, the government aims to stimulate economic growth and generate revenues.

During the last years, however, land-based investments have frequently proceeded with insufficient transparency, weak safeguards, and limited involvement of affected communities, sometimes exacerbating social tensions and environmental degradation.

Nonetheless, macroeconomic indicators point to progress in poverty reduction. World Bank data show that the national poverty rate fell from 27.6 per cent in 2007 to 18.3 per cent in 2018, while the proportion of the population living below the lower middle-income threshold of \$4.20 per day (2021 PPP) is expected to fall from 58.5 per cent to 33.1 per cent by 2025 (World Bank, 2025).

As much of the country's growth was based on debt-financed investment, recent signs indicate that this model is reaching its limits. Despite successes in poverty reduction, structural barriers remain that reinforce Laos' status as one of the least developed countries.

Nonetheless, the government is increasingly focusing on investment-driven development as a path to economic transformation, and, as part of this strategy, land has become a key lever of development policy. It is viewed simultaneously as a productive asset, a spatial basis for infrastructure, and a source of raw material extraction. This has contributed to the rise of public

debt, especially through large-scale hydropower projects and other capital-intensive investments, often financed by external loans.

For rural populations, however, the concrete benefits have often been unevenly distributed or limited. Empirical studies show that land concessions are often characterized by weak coordination between institutions and insufficient consideration of existing land use plans and local priorities (CDE, 2020).

A recurring problem in these projects is the marginal role of affected communities in decisions that directly affect their livelihoods. Agricultural, mining, and infrastructure projects are often planned and implemented with limited transparency and without meaningful consultation or consent. This governance gap has, in many cases, led to social tensions, environmental damage, and the degradation of agricultural and forest land. While recent efforts by state actors and development partners aim to strengthen participation and multistakeholder dialogue, they also reveal the extent to which inclusive, rights-based land governance remains an unresolved challenge.

### **3.2 Legal Uncertainty, Climate Change, and Growing Vulnerability**

A central challenge for sustainable development in Laos is the current land rights insecurity, especially among the country's rural population. Women, ethnic minorities, and people in forest areas are particularly affected by this and threatened in their livelihoods if investors implement projects without the necessary safeguards. In 2024, the Laotian National Assembly recognised land rights in forest areas, which marks a step forward for people living in these designated areas. Up to then, land titles and land use certificates have not been issued in these areas, due to concerns that formalizing tenure might accelerate deforestation. As 70 per cent of Laos' territory is designated as state-protected forest, communities residing within the three categories of state-owned forest (Protection Forestland, Preservation/Conservation Forestland, and Production Forestland) could not obtain any formal recognition of their land rights.

Despite this reform, the challenges remain considerable. Of an estimated three million land parcels in Laos, only about 1.8 million are registered. Over 70 per cent of the population lives from agriculture and forestry, but benefits little from investment in resource-intensive sectors. Climate change is exacerbating the situation: more frequent flooding, rising temperatures and extreme weather are hitting rural areas particularly hard (World Bank Group and Asian Development Bank, 2021). Uncertain land rights hinder adaptation strategies, as households without titles are less likely to invest in sustainable management and have no access to credit. This increases the risk of land conflicts and exacerbates poverty.

### **3.3 Ethnic Diversity and Historical Influences in Northern Laos**

The situation is most critical for rural populations belonging to minorities or ethnic communities, who often live in remote regions and are frequently unaware of their land rights or have insufficient information about them.

The Laotian government recognises 49 ethnic groups and over 160 subgroups (Minority Rights Group, 2018). In the north in particular, many of these communities continue to manage their land according to customary tenure systems that have developed over generations. These are based on shared norms and collective agreements, not on written law. They regulate how land is distributed, used, maintained, and passed on. In most cases, communal management is the primary focus, supplemented by negotiated rights of use.

State land administration inevitably comes into conflict with these traditional systems when land is registered. Delineation of property boundaries can create a new legal and social order that can change existing community structures, access rights, and cultural traditions. While customary law is flexible and community-oriented, state law relies on the formalization of individual property rights through deeds and titles. This change can cause uncertainty, exclusion, or conflict if local tenure systems are not sufficiently considered in project implementation.

### **3.4 Land, Culture and Customary Rights**

For many of these ethnic groups, land is much more than an economic asset. It is closely interwoven with their social structure and cultural identity, and affects land management and use practices in everyday life. Agricultural fields, forests, and residential areas are part of shared histories, beliefs, and customary rights.

Specifically those ethnic communities of northern Laos can be considered as “Indigenous” groups, although they are not officially recognized as such by the state. The Laotian state restricts itself to officially classifying these communities as ‘ethnic groups’, although many characteristics correspond to international criteria normally assigned to communities considered to be “Indigenous”: they have their historical roots in pre-colonial societies, have their own cultural customs and spiritual beliefs, and often still practice their own languages (a significant proportion speak little or no Lao). Politically, they often are marginalized, excluded from decision-making processes, and thus significantly vulnerable. The distinction between “Indigenous” and “ethnic” is not merely semantic, but has direct practical effects: Under international human rights law, Indigenous peoples are considered special rights holders who enjoy specific protection – unlike farmers or local communities in the broader sense (Barume, 2025). By not recognizing them as “Indigenous”, the rights to which they are entitled, at least according to international standards and norms, are at risk.

Customary tenure systems will most likely be affected or can even disappear when it comes to formalization efforts through land registration by the state. Naturally, these informal and often unwritten norms then clash with state law, impacting centuries-old traditions and cultural practices. For instance, there is a risk that state systems aim at individualization and formalization, while customary rights generally are community-oriented. While respect for local traditions is often expressed by state actors, their interventions nonetheless change social relationships of communities to their land, thus having an effect not only on parcel boundaries as such, but also on wider governance procedures, social relationships, and power balances.

Sensitive mediation between legal and customary concepts is crucial for the success of land projects.

Therefore, land management interventions such as formalizing land rights through statutory registration procedures should require the consent of the communities affected, not just as a formal step, but as a key prerequisite for legitimacy and sustainable development.

## **4. TENURE INSECURITY IN LAOS**

### **4.1 Land Tenure in Laos: Context and Key Issues**

Over 70% of Laos' rural households live directly or indirectly from agriculture and forestry (World Bank Group and International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, 2023). Numerous economic development projects and investments have affected them in various ways, but have not achieved to reduce overall poverty significantly. Due to these investments, social conflicts and environmental problems occurred in Laos during the last decades (Kenney Lazar et al., 2023), exacerbated by uncertain land rights and poor land administration. Most of the land in Laos is yet unregistered, which jeopardises the legal security of the rural population, particularly affecting the most vulnerable population segments, among them ethnic minorities and women.

The allocation of land titles began in the 1990s. Between 1996 and 2009, the World Bank, Germany and other countries supported two Laotian land titling projects. Further initiatives are currently underway, including the Lao-German Land Management and Decentralised Planning (LM DP) project, which has been supervised by GIZ since 2015, and the Mekong Region Land Governance (MRLG) project (until 2025).

In line with their development goals and policy frameworks, the Lao government now plans to systematically register 1.2 million land parcels in the coming years. The aim is to transform informal land ownership into legally secure land use rights, in order to promote development and sustainable investment. This is reasonable, as studies show that land titles and legal certainty encourage those investments that are more sustainable, responding to challenges such as climate adaptation and food security, and strengthening local markets, rather than merely facilitating the extraction of raw materials for export. Building on this, the Land Management Project Laos (LMPL) applies a Systematic Land Registration (SLR) approach to promote more efficient and sustainable land use.

### **4.2 Land Tenure in Laos: Context and Key Issues**

The German government is supporting Laos in this endeavour with the LMPL, providing 7.325 million euros in funding. The project is modernising the infrastructure and services of the relevant authorities, for example, by providing surveying equipment, software, and digital tools for land registration, and developing and delivering training courses to strengthen the skills of government employees and other stakeholders. The overall objective is to enable the rural population in the poor regions of the country to participate in planning and decision-making

processes and benefit in the long term from economic development through resilient land titles. The project's specific target is to register 125,000 plots of land in four target provinces and enter them in the national land register system, the Lao LandReg. The LMPL has three main components:

- Improved Infrastructure and Services: Upgrading buildings and providing equipment for provincial and district offices of MoNRE; Providing updated software and tools for land registration and land management.
- Enhance Systematic Land Registration (SLR) to: Add 125,000 parcels to the land register (Lao LandReg); Digitise existing analogue land certificates and transfer them to the Lao LandReg system.
- Training and Capacity Building: Providing training for government staff and others involved in the LMPL project.

The project is aligned with national and international development goals, in particular toward achieving SDG 15. It aims to empower the rural population through secure land rights and thus contribute to the various SDGs. The VGGT serve as the overarching governance framework, whose principles are translated from theory into practice through concrete technical application. Another important standard in the project is the principle of Free, Prior and Informed consent (FPIC). The project pursues an inclusive approach of integrating the local population into the project, specifically asking for consent and strengthening their land rights through awareness raising and dispute resolution measures. The participation and inclusion of the population, especially vulnerable and marginalised groups, is considered crucial to the success of the project.

### **4.3 Systematic Land Registration in Laos**

The formal certification of land use rights in Laos is achieved through SLR as a process, as it is common in many similar projects around the world. SLR identifies, delimits, records, validates, adjudicates, and registers all parcels of land in a specific area, e.g. a village, securing people's land use rights and enabling them to obtain a land title certificate – a document issued by the District Office of Agriculture and Environment.

SLR follows a structured sequence of steps. At the beginning, our approach emphasizes on informing the villagers and seeking their Free, Prior, and Informed consent, abbreviated FPIC (see chapter 5). After a 15-days consultation period, existing land use, including residential and agricultural areas, is then mapped and documented. In the next step, all land parcels' boundaries are identified and surveyed, and information on land users and evidences on their respective rights is collected. The resulting outputs – a village land parcel or cadaster map and a register of land users – are publicly displayed for a period of 30 days, allowing community members to review the collected and processed information and submit corrections or objections. During this period, disputes related to parcel boundaries or land use rights are addressed and resolved. Once the review period has concluded and all objections have been clarified, land use rights for each parcel are formally confirmed and adjudicated. The process concludes with the registration of parcels and associated rights in the land registry system – the Lao LandReg – and the issuance

of land certificates. In this respect, our approach aligns with the standard SLR methodology already applied in Laos, but emphasises the application of the FPIC component during the pre-registration phase, which has been carefully planned and coordinated with government authorities. This phase and its corresponding implementation by different specialized teams represents a novel element in Laos and pushes the process more closely toward international norms and standards.



*Photo: Village consultation as part of FPIC activities in Houaphan province*

## 5. GUIDING PRINCIPLES AND VALUES

### 5.1 Normative Framework Guiding LMPL Implementation

LMPL is primarily guided by a set of core principles and values, as well as by national legislation and relevant government directives, such as the land law of Lao PDR and the directives of the Ministry of Agriculture and Environment on land registration and surveying. This aligns with the 2017 Party Resolution on Land Policy and complies with the existing legal framework, supporting the Government’s “One Country – One System” approach to ensure consistency and coordination in land registration.

At the same time, LMPL adheres to a variety of internationally recognized norms and standards regarding the responsible governance of land, as well as human rights and environmental protection principles. In doing so, LMPL feels committed to not only expressing commitment to these standards but also finding ways to practically apply them while considering the government’s needs and requirements. Central to this approach is translating the VGGT’s key principles into practice and ensuring their alignment with the SDGs, with Goal 15 (“Life on Land”) being particularly central.

A cornerstone of the project is a systematic and practical application of the principle of FPIC: all land registration activities begin only with the clear agreement of the communities involved after a certain FPIC period of 15 days. While FPIC is a standard in many projects worldwide, including in Laos, interpretations of how it should be applied vary significantly across contexts. For this reason, we considered it essential to develop a context-specific procedure implemented

by trained community engagement and awareness teams. This time-efficient methodology responds to community needs while aligning with the government’s ambitious land registration targets.

LMPL also commits to a “do no harm” and “leave no one behind” policy, focusing specifically on the rights and protection of vulnerable and marginalized groups. With its “pro-poor approach”, the project prioritizes poorer districts in four northern provinces – Xiangkhouang, Houaphan, Oudomxai and Xaignabouly.

### **5.2 The VGGT as Governance Framework in LMPL**

The VGGT are the overarching framework for responsible land governance and administration, and serve as guidance for all the project’s activities. As stated in the guidelines, LMPL feels committed to “improve governance of tenure of land, fisheries and forests” (VGGT).

Furthermore, as outlined in the guidelines, LMPL’s activities are committed to

seek to do so for the benefit of all, with an emphasis on vulnerable and marginalized people, with the goals of food security and progressive realization of the right to adequate food, poverty eradication, sustainable livelihoods, social stability, housing security, rural development, environmental protection and sustainable social and economic development. All programmes, policies and technical assistance to improve governance of tenure through the implementation of these Guidelines should be consistent with States’ existing obligations under international law, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international human rights instruments (FAO, 2022).

The guidelines formulate principles on responsible tenure governance, rights, and responsibilities, and specifically address the “tenure rights of indigenous peoples and other communities with customary tenure systems, as well as of informal tenure rights”. Although the VGGT are not legally binding, they provide an important normative framework and are applied in a manner consistent with existing obligations under national and international law, while taking into account relevant voluntary commitments.

### **5.3 FPIC as a Cornerstone of Responsible Land Governance**

FPIC is an internationally recognized principle and serves as a key guideline for projects involving Indigenous peoples and local communities. It is closely linked to the principles of self-determination, co-determination, and the protection of individual and collective rights. Several international human rights bodies and legal interpretations refer to this principle. FPIC is intended to ensure that communities participate in decisions about projects without pressure or undue influence. To this end, those affected must be involved at an early stage, before activities begin. They should receive timely and understandable information about the project, including the planned measures, potential benefits, and risks. FPIC gives communities the right to express their consent or concerns and to reconsider their position during project implementation.

This principle is enshrined in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), which was adopted by the UN General Assembly in 2007 (UNDRIP, 2007). UNDRIP emphasizes the importance of consultation and consent in various areas, such as legislative or administrative measures, the use of land and resources, the use of cultural and spiritual heritage, and the approval of projects affecting Indigenous territories. Although UNDRIP is not legally binding, it provides important guidance and guidelines for international standards.

The International Labour Organisation (ILO) Convention No. 169 already calls for consultations with Indigenous peoples when development projects or legal and administrative measures could affect them since 1989 (ILO, 1989). It requires that these discussions be conducted in good faith and with the aim of reaching an agreement. For states that have ratified the Convention, it is legally binding and contains specific requirements. Although Laos has not ratified the Convention, Germany has done so in 2021. In our interpretation, this implies that Germany, as the donor of LMPL, has a responsibility to ensure that these provisions are respected in the design and implementation of the project.

In the LMPL, FPIC serves as a guiding principle, in line with the World Bank's Environmental and Social Standard 7 (ESS7) and KfW's sustainability guidelines. The aim is to promote inclusive consultation processes and ensure that affected communities are involved and their perspectives are taken into account before project activities begin – in line with international best practices.

#### **5.4 Do No Harm and Leave No One Behind**

LMPL pursues a conflict-sensitive approach that is closely linked to the principles of FPIC and the VGGT. Land-related interventions often take place in contexts where there are existing tensions, competing claims, or power asymmetries – both within communities and in relation to external actors such as government agencies or investors.

Against this backdrop, LMPL is committed to the principle of “do no harm.” Potential negative impacts on social relations, usage rights, and local governance structures should be identified early on, avoided, or – if unavoidable – effectively mitigated. FPIC serves as a key instrument for making decision-making processes transparent, inclusive, and voluntary, while the VGGT provide the normative framework for the responsible management of land, conflicts, and rights.

## **6. CONFLICT MANAGEMENT AND DISPUTE RESOLUTION**

The project furthermore applies a conflict-sensitive approach to land registration, grounded in the principles of conflict management, dispute resolution, and do no harm. It distinguishes between short-term land disputes and long-term land conflicts: disputes involve individual, temporary disagreements over boundaries or ownership, while conflicts often have broader social, economic, or legal implications that can affect entire communities. Early action is crucial because land conflicts arise when competing interests collide, whether to secure livelihoods,

for economic use, or for investment. Causes can include uncertain land rights, resource scarcity, overlapping legal systems, or historical grievances. If not addressed promptly, conflicts can escalate, erode trust, and undermine the objectives of land registration. Common conflict types include unclear boundaries due to missing documentation or natural changes, overlapping claims arising from historical or legal tensions, resistance to registration out of fear of land loss, taxation, or mistrust, and land use conflicts such as agriculture versus conservation, or disputes over inheritance and access. Unresolved conflicts can delay registration, increase costs, weaken confidence in authorities and procedures, generate social tensions – especially for vulnerable groups – and create inequality and legal uncertainty (Wehrmann, 2017).

The project’s approach emphasizes early identification of conflicts, inclusive participation of government, local leaders, communities, women, and vulnerable groups, transparent communication through public consultations and FPIC, practical tools such as maps and claim documents, and safe spaces where all participants feel respected and heard. Solutions range from consensual, negotiation-based methods, including facilitated discussions, reconciliation, and mediation, to non-consensual, adversarial approaches such as arbitration or court proceedings, while traditional practices like village assemblies, councils of elders, and spiritual leadership are recognized and integrated into formal procedures. Conflict sensitivity is central: the project seeks to understand the context, recognize interactions between interventions and the local situation, and take measures to prevent harm while promoting positive outcomes.

Land conflicts are common and often unavoidable, but by addressing them early, fairly, inclusively, and constructively, the project ensures that communities are engaged, processes remain transparent, and local practices are respected, contributing to successful and equitable land registration.

## **7. GENDER EQUALITY AND TRANSFORMATION**

Gender equality in land rights is crucial: secure land tenure empowers women and families, strengthens communities, reduces vulnerability, and supports sustainable development. In Lao PDR, the Constitution, the Land Law, the Family Law, and the National Women’s Development Plan provide a relatively strong legal foundation for women’s ownership, inheritance, and participation in land governance, yet formal recognition remains limited.

The project promotes good practices by involving women at all stages of land registration, from consultations to dispute resolution, encouraging joint land titling, training officials on gender equality, and tracking gender-disaggregated data. We emphasize women’s active participation in land registration and dispute resolution by creating safe, inclusive spaces where they can speak freely. Understanding the gendered impacts of land registration helps identify barriers and ensures women’s perspectives shape project design and outcomes.



*Photo: Focus Group Discussion with women as part of village consultation and FPIC activities, Houaphan province*

## **8. VULNERABLE AND MARGINALIZED PEOPLE**

The project also takes a proactive approach to ensure the meaningful participation of vulnerable groups in the registration process. Vulnerable individuals or groups – such as women with limited decision-making power, ethnic minorities facing language or cultural barriers, youth and the elderly, persons with disabilities, migrant families, landless people, and other marginalized households – often encounter structural or traditional barriers that limit their involvement. Without targeted engagement, these groups risk being excluded from decisions, lacking access to information in their own language, fearing loss of land or resources, or facing heightened risks of conflict and dispossession.

To address these challenges, the project conducts dedicated focus group discussions with vulnerable groups, creating safe spaces where participants can speak freely without pressure or domination. These sessions help identify specific barriers to participation in land registration or FPIC processes, reveal how policies may affect different groups unequally, and ensure that the rights, needs, and perspectives of marginalized individuals inform project design, implementation, and dispute resolution mechanisms. Furthermore, awareness materials in different languages were developed. By centering vulnerable voices, the project promotes more inclusive, equitable, and effective land governance that strengthens both social cohesion and tenure security.

## **9. IMPLEMENTATION CHALLENGES AND CONCLUSION**

The Government of Laos has shown openness to LMPL's approach of integrating these standards into its land registration process, particularly through obtaining consent from affected local communities. Initial government concerns focused on time and cost pressures, rather than

transparency or participation. LMPL addressed these by emphasizing practical advantages: careful, conflict- and gender-sensitive preparation reduces disputes, saving time and money, while promoting inclusive and sustainable land governance.

Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) play a central role in our approach to raising awareness, strengthening community agency, and bridging local populations with state institutions. Pilot activities in two provinces integrate CSOs in the Community Engagement and Awareness Raising Teams to operationalize conflict- and gender-sensitive practices. Furthermore, private surveying companies working on the project receive training on the FPIC-approach as well as conflict and gender sensitive practices. This is intended to be scaled up after the pilot phase.

The implementation of the project requires navigating tensions between national targets and international standards. Compromises, such as a 15-day consultation period instead of a longer period, balance FPIC principles with political realities, improving participation compared with previous practices. Research revealed gaps in government actors' understanding of FPIC, especially with respect to villagers' need for adequate time, reflection, and informed decision-making.

By extending FPIC to local communities and focusing on vulnerable groups, LMPL strengthens tenure security, supports inclusive and sustainable land governance, and contributes to SDG 1 (No Poverty), SDG 5 (Gender Equality), SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities), and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions).

In this sense, it is crucial that land registration projects, besides their technical and operational aspects, are sensitive to political systems, power dynamics, and economic priorities, alongside showing diplomacy and compromise to align national procedures with international standards.

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## **BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES**

Jan Schulz is International Research Director at the Swiss consulting firm LandNetwork. His work focuses on responsible land governance and land rights. He has a background in social anthropology and journalism and is engaged at the intersection of development cooperation, human rights, and land governance. Within the Land Management Project Laos (LMPL), he is responsible for the application of FPIC, conflict-sensitive and Do No Harm approaches, and the monitoring of environmental and social safeguards.

Lorenz Jenni is Managing Director of LandNetwork and team leader of the Land Management Project Laos (LMPL) on behalf of GOPA Worldwide Consultants. He studied surveying and geomatics at the University of Applied Sciences in Basel and holds a master's degree in GIS from the Universitat Politècnica de Catalunya. For more than 20 years, he has been active in land administration and land information management projects, serving as a consultant to public and multilateral institutions, including the Swiss government, KfW, the European Union, the IDB, and the World Bank, with a regional focus on Latin America, the Caribbean, and Southeast Europe.

## **CONTACTS**

Jan Schulz  
Landnetwork  
Gurzelenstrasse 5  
2502 Biel/Bienne  
SWITZERLAND  
Phone: +41 79 475 00 45  
E-Mail: [schulz@landnetwork.ch](mailto:schulz@landnetwork.ch)  
Website: [www.landnetwork.ch](http://www.landnetwork.ch)

Lorenz Jenni  
Landnetwork  
Gurzelenstrasse 5  
2502 Biel/Bienne  
SWITZERLAND  
Phone: +41 79 475 00 45  
E-Mail: [lorenz.jenni@landnetwork.ch](mailto:lorenz.jenni@landnetwork.ch)  
Website: [www.landnetwork.ch](http://www.landnetwork.ch)