

## Centering Women's Land Rights for Equitable Food Systems Transformation

A discussion starter on UN FSS Action Track 1: Safe and nutritious food for all

By Michelle McLinden Nuijen.

### Introduction

As part of the Decade of Action, the United Nations [Food Systems Summit 2021](#) (UN FSS) focuses on 'bold new actions, solutions and strategies' to transform food production and consumption and progress on all 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This is because the success of each SDG relies, to varying degrees, on healthy diets and sustainable and equitable food systems ([SOFI 2020](#)). The COVID-19 crisis shows that transformative change and nutritional resilience are more urgent than ever, [especially for the most marginalized](#). With slow and unequal progress on malnutrition, and with hunger and obesity on the rise, food systems must become nutritious and efficient, but also equitable and inclusive so that no one is left behind ([SOFI 2020](#); [Global Nutrition Report 2020](#)).

To supercharge progress, the UN FSS has set five [Action Tracks](#) in motion (see Box 1). This brief links *Action Track 1: Ensure access to safe and nutritious food for all* to improved governance of tenure and the role of women's land rights in particular, a cross-

### Box 1. UN FSS Action Tracks

The Summit's [five Action Tracks](#) create a multi-stakeholder space to 'supercharge progress' through new actions, partnerships, and scaled-up initiatives in the following areas:

[AT1](#): Ensure access to safe and nutritious food for all

[AT2](#): Shift to sustainable consumption patterns

[AT3](#): Boost nature-positive production

[AT4](#): Advance equitable livelihoods

[AT5](#): Build resilience to vulnerabilities, shocks and stress

In each track, actors scout out 'cross-cutting levers of change' in areas such as finance, data, governance, culture, innovation and the empowerment of women and young people.

cutting lever of change critical toward delivering safe, healthy and nutritious diets to all.

### Food systems, nutrition equity and Action Track 1

A sustainable food system<sup>1</sup> delivers food security and nutrition for all—including

<sup>1</sup> See [AT1's Scientific Group paper](#) for an in-depth look at the food systems characteristics relevant to the UN FSS.

future generations—without compromising the economic, social and environmental bases that such security relies (FAO 2018). This system joins all elements, processes and activities relating to the production, processing, distribution, preparation and consumption of food and includes people, the environment, institutions, infrastructure and inputs as well as the socio-economic and environmental outcomes of food system activities ([HLPE 2017](#)).

Barriers within food systems, which restrict access to healthy and affordable food, often result in nutrition inequities<sup>2</sup> for the vulnerable and marginalized: women and children; the poor, rural and remote; minority and indigenous groups; and those in crisis and conflict areas ([Global Nutrition Report 2020](#)). Pre-pandemic, healthy diets were unaffordable for roughly three billion people ([SOFI 2020](#)); a dangerous mix of COVID-19, conflict and climate change may push 150 million into extreme poverty in 2021, [the first rise in extreme poverty in 20 years](#). To meet and make its mark, Action Track 1 (see AT1 in Box 2) needs to fuse SDG 2 and 10 with scalable interventions focused on women's land rights—a crucial enabler and foundational factor to many parts of food systems. This women-centered focus not only combats hunger and poverty, it also tackles other global challenges that, when combined, seriously damage food systems and roll back SDG progress.

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<sup>2</sup> The [Global Nutrition Report 2020](#) provides a comprehensive overview on the links between food systems and health systems for nutrition equity.

<sup>3</sup> Land tenure systems range from informal to formal and can include customary, group, collective, leasehold and freehold; See [Realizing Women's Rights to Land and Other Productive Resources](#) for a comprehensive overview.

## Improving access to healthy diets through women's land rights

Land is the literal bedrock of agricultural productivity (FAO 2011) and food availability, which refers to the type and diversity of food on offer, is affected by food production systems reliant on land and water access ([HLPE 2017](#)). The governance of tenure<sup>3</sup>—or the ways society manages access to, control over, and use of land and natural resources (Jansen 2020)—is therefore a fundamental pillar of any food system. However, as a longstanding source of prestige, power and political control (Johnsen 2019), land is not always governed or distributed equitably. Since the 2008/09 global economic downturn and the food and fuel crises, international scrutiny has continued to evolve around the different types and impacts of land investments which aim, in whole or part, to profitably meet policy objectives around increased food supplies or reduced greenhouse gas emissions. These investments often extrapolate from the bigger is better 'productivist paradigm' (De Schutter 2014) which is often based on an antagonistic relationship with nature and an industrial model of inputs and outputs embedded within an unstable financial system (Fakhri 2020). Particular attention has zeroed-in on the large-scale plantations which 'grab' land and resources for export-oriented monocrops at the detriment of rural and indigenous communities.<sup>4</sup> While many businesses apply international sustainability frameworks such as the [IFC Performance Standards](#), these 'best practice' guidelines [fall](#)

<sup>4</sup> See for example: farmland and agricultural production (Lorenzo Cotula et al. 2009; McLinden Nuijen 2012; McLinden Nuijen, Pratchvuthy, and Westen 2014); biofuel production (Borras, McMichael, and Scoones 2010); climate change adaptation and agricultural production (McLinden Nuijen 2019); and infrastructure among others (Zoomers 2010).

[acutely short](#) in identifying and preventing land rights impacts providing further impetus behind the use of the 'Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests in Context of National Food Security' ([VGGT](#)) as a better tool to improve land governance.

Inequities in land are a core focus because they lead to a host of other mutually reinforcing socio-economic inequalities across several dimensions of wellbeing including health, personal security, self-determination, and respect by others (Lipton and Saghai 2017). Inequalities in land holdings transmit intergenerational poverty (Bird 2007) and so are often ascribed (e.g., inherited) rather than achieved to reflect what Lipton and Saghai (2017) have referred to as a 'social lottery.' Those lucky enough to obtain a winning ticket are more likely to enjoy prosperity rather than face peril because households with means are better able to ensure ends when it comes to the education, health and food security of their children (Bird 2007). But secure tenure and stronger land rights are not only the path to household well-being and prosperity: from the village to country level, societies with lower land inequality show faster agricultural progress and overall economic growth (Lipton 2009). If local agency and human rights are side-lined, we risk patching-up broken systems with entitlements (Patel 2012). Women's land rights are therefore fundamental to the long-term sustainability of the food system as a whole as well as to reaching progress on all SDGs, especially those with [targets and indicators related to land and equitable development](#).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> The 2030 Agenda has targets and indicators related to land and equity under SDGs 1, 2, 5, 11 and 15. Women's land rights and access to resources are specifically

## Women, farming and food

Even though national laws and international instruments often recognize and promote gender equality, women continue to face widespread discrimination. Women lack access to and control over land, forests and fisheries as well as other important livelihood and wellbeing resources (FAO 2011; Clement et al. 2019; Ragasa, Aberman, and Alvarez Mingote 2019; Larson, Castellanos, and Jensen 2019; Agarwal 2018). Gender intersects with religion, caste, class, ethnicity and age to heighten the ways different women face different manifestations of vulnerability and exclusion (Clement et al. 2019). Yet when women have stronger autonomy, access to credit and extension services, and control over farmland and income, adequate consumption becomes steadier, diets become more diverse, and children's health and nutrition improve (Meinzen-Dick et al. 2017; Larson, Castellanos, and Jensen 2019; Agarwal 1994; Doss 2006). In fact, when women own land, the prevalence of childhood stunting is reduced (Rehman, Ping, and Razzaq 2019). Finally, agricultural programs that focus on gender, women's empowerment, behavior change, and nutrition more often result in nutritional outcomes (see Ragasa, Aberman, and Alvarez Mingote 2019 for an overview). With this in mind, the next section illustrates the ways a women's land rights intervention in Brazil can improve access to healthy diets at different scales in line with the goals of the UN FSS and AT1 (Box 2).

## Equitable scaling in Brazil

The project called *Strengthening rural women's autonomy and identity: Agroecology, food*

addressed in Targets and Indicators 1.4; 1.4.2; 2.3; 2.3.2; 5.a; 5.a.1; 5.a.2; and 11.1.

## Box 2. AT1 impact areas

1. Reduce hunger and inequality  
Reducing hunger (SDG 2) requires increased incomes throughout the food system and reducing poverty and inequalities (SDG 10) by gender, age, race/ethnicity, employment status, geographical location, and other factors.
2. Increase access to nutritious food  
Strand 2 uses [WHO Global Targets](#) related to reduced low birth weight; childhood wasting, stunting and overweight; anaemia in women of reproductive age; and increased rate of exclusive breastfeeding in the first six months.
3. Safe food  
Despite the absence of a global food safety target for 2030, strand 3 focuses on the roots of foodborne diseases such as heavy metal contamination.

*sovereignty and producer solidarity network* evolved from [a scalable model](#) developed by [Espaço Feminista](#) (EF). The intervention provides a good example for the UN FSS because it synergizes with the goals of all Action Tracks and targets a range of areas outlined in [AT1's Scientific Group paper](#) including *inter alia*: Sustainable agricultural practices and participation in farmers' organizations; Smallholder support to increase the type and diversity of food on offer for households and markets; Investment in extension services and training programs for women; and the adoption of climate-resilient crops.

Although the idea [gained some traction in 2008](#), the intervention materialized in the State of Pernambuco after funding was secured in 2017. Together with a multi-stakeholder platform comprised of

government agencies, academics and civil society organizations, and using the concept of *Quintais Produtivos* (productive gardens) and a [locally-adapted version of the VGGT](#), a group of 120 women receive support from the municipality of Bonito (Agreste zone) and technical assistance from IPA (Intituto Agronomico de Pernambuco) to produce locally-important vegetables, fruits, and traditional medicine through agroecology—a robust means to [build climate-resilient livelihoods and food systems](#).

Fresh fruit and vegetables are produced for both household and market use. As a result, women learn new skills, actively preserve traditional knowledge, earn market income and increase autonomy while making affordable and healthy diets available at the household to community levels. The recent [rapid response](#), rolled out to address food insecurity as a result of COVID-19 shutdowns, also shows the intervention's ability to increase access to healthy diets at the community level. Urban and rural women from different municipalities in Pernambuco used some of the same solidarity networks that were established in the intervention to [exchange food and distribute hand-made face masks, and hand gel](#); non-perishable food and food allowances also assisted households in accessing healthy diets while healthy meals were delivered to street dwellers twice a week.

The success of the intervention is locally recognized and an additional 300 women producers are currently organizing in the Zona da Mata Norte (an area traditionally dedicated to sugar cane production) to implement gardens. Moreover, some parts of the intervention have been paired with EF's [land regularization program](#) so some of the women in Bonito (from the informal settlement Mutirão) will also be granted land

titles. Out of the 479 titles, 71 percent will be issued in women's names as sole or joint owners. This makes the women—regardless of marital status—the first and primary beneficiary in accordance with Brazilian law. Applicable to a total of 17 similar locations, the land regularization program is already being scaled up with more *Quintais Produtivos* in the pipeline. As one of the founding members of a [global WLR platform](#), Espaço Feminista is well-placed to link-up and share knowledge and resources to reach rural and urban communities in all regions.

### Recommendations for equitable scaling

The intervention above shows how systematically integrating a focus on women's land rights can improve access to healthy diets at different scales. The following recommendations serve as additional starting points for discussion and up-scaling.

**Scale interventions that prioritize WLR from the grassroots.** [Significant development contributions are made at the local level](#) and one way to improve access to fresh and nutritious food for all is through a focus on local food systems (De Schutter 2014). [Indigenous environmental knowledge](#) can additionally provide important information related to sustainability, climate change impacts and adaptation, and organized women's groups understand what is at stake and can activate local to global networks and other resources, showing what is possible at and beyond the household and community level. Through increased [resource flows](#), local communities can decide on funding priorities and consider alternatives between priority funding areas, such as in [agricultural adaptation](#). If done well, and in combination with the second recommendation below, interventions can

[advance the SDGs](#) and promote [truly sustainable production](#), encourage [more effective and inclusive governance](#), build transparency and trust in the government, and provide flexibility to suit the context-specific nature of communities, land use, food and food systems.

**Invest in implementing and popularizing the use of the VGGT.** The VGGT recognize the importance of land tenure to gender equality and eradicating hunger. To make the guidelines more accessible, [the People's Manual](#) has translated the technical language of the VGGT into concrete topics and action areas in six different languages. In addition to the case of Pernambuco, Brazil above, [a number of other good examples show](#) how the guidelines are being used in different parts of the world to develop multi-stakeholder platforms, build capacity, and reform legal and policy frameworks through just and inclusive means.

**Use available frameworks and data tools to set integrated research, policy and funding agendas.** Because many factors can prevent women from benefitting from land ownership, land titles alone cannot secure tenure. One [analytical framework](#) can be used to design better policies and programs as it provides information about the current situation for women's land rights—including any gaps between law and practice—in a specific country, state, or community. Additionally, new data tools can reveal evidence gaps and biases that hinder the development of policies and innovative interventions. For example, the [Food Systems Evidence Gap Map](#), which curates evidence on food systems interventions in LMICs, found that few studies examined interventions on women's decision making even though women play a key role in food systems. Similarly, researchers used AI



machine-learning to map existing research for on-farm interventions; they found that gender themes were rarely addressed even though women account for a significant portion of the agricultural labor force and are often responsible for very large shares of agricultural tasks (Ricciardi et al. 2020). One caveat: the accuracy and applicability of the results for inclusive and sustainable development rely on the questions being asked.

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**Issue date:** February 2021

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#### About LANDac

LANDac – the Netherlands Land Academy is a partnership between Dutch organizations and their Southern partners working on land governance for equitable and sustainable development. LANDac brings together researchers, policymakers and practitioners who share a concern for land inequality and land-related conflicts to conduct research, distribute information and forge new partnerships.

LANDac is hosted by Utrecht University and financed by the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

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