

Land Governance and the COVID-19 Crisis: Agenda for knowledge and action

COVID-19 crisis puts land rights under pressure

As LANDac (the Netherlands Land Academy) we are highly concerned about the impacts of the global COVID-19 pandemic on the land rights of poor people and insist on the importance of sustainable and inclusive land governance. While it is still early to assess the full extent of the impacts of the crisis, alarming observations about forced evictions and a shrinking civil space are coming in from different parts of the world. We urge for early action on the land right violations that are reported now, and argue for a close monitoring of developments in the longer term.

The COVID-19 crisis and the measures taken to curb the pandemic impact poor people heavily. From a land rights perspective, the most worrying immediate effects include the following:

- Loss of livelihood options, especially in the informal sectors, and deepening levels of poverty and food insecurity.
- Suspension of democratic controls and the use of violence against environmental and human rights defenders.
- The closing of land administration services as part of lockdown measures.

We fear that these developments lead to increased risks of irregular land acquisition, resource grabbing and loss of assets and land access for the poor. This is already manifest in some regions in the Global South. We expect that the full extent and impact of shifts in pressures on land due to the pandemic, in combination with the potential erosion of protective and due diligence measures, will become clear over the next months. We summarise these concerns as follows:

- **Loss of assets and land access, and growing inequality:** Poor people in both rural and urban areas are at risk of losing their land and properties. In informal urban settings, the close density and risk for disease transmission may be used as justification for forced evictions. The loss of employment and informal life support systems in urban settings have caused a move out of the cities. If de-urbanisation persists, the question is what it will mean for pressures on land in rural settings. Will this lead to squeezing out the poorest segments of the population, through distress sales? What will be the implications for women's access to land?
- **Lack of due diligence in land-based investments:** It is as yet unclear how the expected global economic crisis will affect investment flows. A financial crisis might limit investment possibilities of major players. However, we may see an increase in predatory capitalism and governments may be tempted to attract investments to finance the recovery from the crisis without observing the necessary due diligence.
- **Reduced quality of land governance services:** It remains to be seen whether public land administration services will be restored to their pre-COVID levels. Limitations in funding and

capacity may limit the role of land governance actors in curtailing irregular land acquisition and enhancing tenure security. Formal land governance systems and programmes aimed at ensuring women's land rights may be disrupted, which might negatively affect women's right to land registration and ownership.

- **Suspended democratic controls on land governance:** The worrying scenario here is that democratic controls, suspended under states of emergency and lockdowns, will not be restored to their pre-COVID-19 levels and civic space will remain restricted for a long time. The effect may be widespread and cause irreversible grabbing of land, water and forests.

We fear that COVID-19 develops into a severe land rights and land governance crisis. We face a serious risk that the gains of two decades of investing in land governance for sustainable and equitable development are undone. LANDac, as part of the global land governance community, see it as their shared duty to map the problems and suggest adequate responses. The impacts of the COVID-19 crisis need to be placed squarely on the agenda of regional, national and international policymakers. Efforts to mitigate risks to land rights should be stepped up. For the somewhat longer term, the LANDac partnership, with our local and global partners, commits to monitoring developments on the ground, to protect initiatives that aim to improve sustainable and equitable land governance, and to develop a strong knowledge agenda on these issues.

How can you contribute?

- Fill out our [survey](#) (in collaboration with the LANDdialogue)
- Write a blog for our [blog series](#) on land governance and the COVID-19 pandemic
- Share relevant resources with us (landac.geo@uu.nl)