



**Integrating Land Governance into the Post-2015 Agenda  
Harnessing Synergies for Implementation and Monitoring Impact**

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**« Improving land governance in the Mekong region –  
an innovative approach »**

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## **Abstract**

Innovative ways of addressing land governance are needed to improve family farmers' access to, and control over, agricultural land, forests and fisheries in the Mekong region. The Mekong Region Land Governance Programme initiated in March 2014, has been designed and funded by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), with additional support anticipated from the Government of Germany. It is jointly implemented by Land Equity International (LEI) and Professionals for Fair Development (GRET). Recognizing the time required to compile and make available information and analysis, build alliances, and lobby for changes into land policy and practice, its implementation will span over two 4-year phases. Additional like-minded stakeholders will be approached to foster partnerships, to forge alliances and for resource mobilization purpose. Though in its inception, the regional programme provides a flexible basis for supporting effective land policy reform in the coming years in the countries of intervention, notably through its demand-driven character, and the planned linkages to relevant regional policy forums and institutions.

## **Background**

The concession of large areas of family-farmed land to investors has been a deliberate strategy in Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam to accelerate economic transition, with visible negative impact on poverty, food security, agro-biodiversity and the sustainable management of natural resources. Consequently, there is a need to support land governance reform by strengthening the effectiveness of reform actors through learning, alliance building and cross-border cooperation, and by facilitating the emergence of more equitable and pro-poor policies and practices in that region.

From around 2000 onwards, governments in the Mekong region have begun providing long-term use rights of large areas of agricultural land to investors, mostly for industrial agriculture, mining, and hydropower. This has led to a significant shrinking of the area available for family agriculture and reduced access to natural resources that used to contribute to family farmers' income, livelihoods and food security. Many rural marginalized communities, including indigenous peoples' have repeatedly faced resettlement, inadequate compensation, and a great number of them has been driven out of agriculture with limited prospects of alternative rural employment.

With land legislation and policy in Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam currently under review, and based on experiences gathered by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC<sup>1</sup>), pro-rural poor land governance policies and practice can be improved in an innovative manner. Indeed, a number of initiatives to improve farmer families' tenure security have been launched by a wide range of actors, loosely structured through national "land issue working groups". These reform alliances can be strengthened through regional initiatives to learn from and support each other. Indeed, land use change in that region has been to a large extent driven by investors from neighboring countries (China, Vietnam and Thailand). As a consequence, forums dedicated to land governance in the Greater Mekong Subregion or ASEAN+ level shall be supported. The proposed regional approach complements and supports country-

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<sup>1</sup> The Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) is Switzerland's international cooperation agency within the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA)

level efforts through cross-country learning, while it opens up policy space for dialogue and alliance building.

Concretely, the intended outcomes of SDC-initiated regional land governance programme are the following:

(1) **Reform actors** in the 4 targeted countries are **more effective** in securing smallholder tenure (through peer learning, alliance building, and linking with regional and global initiatives)

(2) **Policies, institutions, and land governance practice** are **more favorable** towards farmer families' tenure security and related public goods such as environmental sustainability and social stability.

These outcomes will contribute to the achievement of the overall goal “*Farming families, especially those belonging to ethnic minorities, have secure and equitable access to and control over agricultural land, forest and fisheries*”.

A thorough mapping and stakeholders' analysis (including the identification of current and potential reform actors), as well as an analysis of the underlying political economies and current land governance frameworks will be undertaken in the inception phase. This will assist in defining strategies for supporting alliance building and advocacy, providing targeted technical assistance, and to identify opportunities for policy reforms.

### **Innovative Project Features**

Changes to land policy require a long-term, flexible approach, working with multiple stakeholders to build and strengthen reform coalitions and momentum for change. Focusing on technical assistance to government agencies is necessary but not sufficient: Political astuteness and targeted lobbying, supported by evidence-based policy research, and sound technical assistance are required to change policy and practice in land governance. Land-related services and systems have been government-dominated with strong vested interests and resistance to change. The identification and mobilization of local and regional champions, reform coalitions, public awareness and the capacity of reform actors to advocate for change will provide incentives to Governments, Parliaments and government agencies to prepare, enact and implement more equitable land governance frameworks, laws and policies.

The overall design of the regional programme facilitates responsiveness and flexibility in responding to windows of opportunity for change. Its set-up is independent from any single government agency in partner countries, be they departments of land, forestry, agriculture, mining or others.

Two funding mechanisms are set up in the programme to encourage flexibility and responsiveness. The Quick Disbursement Fund provides funding to respond to policy openings, particularly in situations where no existing funding channels can react in time. The Innovation Fund allows the piloting of innovative approaches developed through peer expertise exchange and other learning modalities over a longer period of 1-2 years.

The designed approach puts reform actors at the centre of planning and influencing policy change. It recognises that government are only one stakeholder, albeit a central one, in influencing change. In each partner country, a national Land Governance Advisor has been positioned to engage with the complex

mix of stakeholders from civil society, academia, private sector, government and parliamentarians, to identify policy openings, respond to reform actor needs, and facilitate support for influencing land policy. Knowledge tools, technical support, and networking capacities will be provided during implementation.

The programme aims at strengthening local level reform actors who understand the specific nature of land issues, policies, and politics at the national level, while also working at the regional level to facilitate cross country learning and space for regional dialogue and alliance building. Existing development modes of national forums for dialogue and advocacy on land governance issues will be supported to further their reach. Value will be added by linking them through the creation of regional platforms and forums, to encourage transboundary learning and alliance building. Through the programme, it will also be attempted to establish a dialogue on land governance issues within the ASEAN Community to facilitate the setting of a regional agenda.

The proposed approach further encourages linkages with global initiatives, networks and institutions (such as the Rights and Resources Initiative (RRI), the International Land Coalition (ILC), the Food First Information and Action Network (FIAN), but also the implementation of the VGGT<sup>2</sup> and, after their adoption, of the CFS-led Principles for responsible agricultural investment in the context of food security and nutrition (rai)). Linking land policy to relevant global, regional and national issues such as food security, gender, economic development and investment, government taxation and revenue, rural and urban development, climate change and disaster risk management provide multiple entry points for reform actors and opportunities to influence land policy.

Innovative ways of addressing land governance are needed to improve family farmers' access to, and control over, agricultural land, forests and fisheries in the Mekong region. The Mekong Region Land Governance Programme initiated in March 2014, has been designed and funded by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), with additional support anticipated from the Government of Germany. It is jointly implemented by Land Equity International (LEI) and Professionals for Fair Development (GRET). Recognizing the time required to compile and make available information and analysis, build alliances, and lobby for changes into land policy and practice, its implementation will span over two 4-year phases. Additional like-minded stakeholders will be approached to foster partnerships, to forge alliances and for resource mobilization purpose. Though in its inception, the regional programme provides a flexible basis for supporting effective land policy reform in the coming years in the countries of intervention notably through its demand-driven character, and the planned linkages to relevant regional policy forums and institutions.

### **Key Words:**

Land governance, Mekong region, knowledge sharing,

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<sup>2</sup> The Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests in the Context of National Food Security, adopted by the Committee on World Food Security in 2012