RESEARCH FINDINGS FROM
THE LAND INEQUALITY INITIATIVE

SYNTHESIS REPORT

UNEVEN GROUND

LAND INEQUALITY AT THE HEART OF UNEQUAL SOCIETIES

BY WARD ANSEEUW AND GIULIA MARIA BALDINELLI

INTERNATIONAL LAND COALITION | UNITED FOR LAND RIGHTS

OXFAM

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women
CFS	Committee on World Food Security
CLA	Communal Land Association
CSO	Civil society organisation
F&Gs	Framework and Guidelines on Land Policy in Africa
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
FPIC	Free, prior, and informed consent
ILC	International Land Coalition
ILO	International Labour Organization
SAFER	Société d'aménagement foncier et d'établissement rural
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
UNDRIP	United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples
VGGTs	Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests in the Context of National Food Security

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In most countries, land inequality is growing. Worse, new measures and analysis published in this synthesis report show that land inequality is significantly higher than previously reported. This trend directly threatens the livelihoods of an estimated 2.5 billion people worldwide involved in smallholder agriculture.

Land inequality is also central to many other forms of inequality related to wealth, power, gender, health, and environment and is fundamentally linked to contemporary global crises of democratic decline, climate change, global health security and pandemics, mass migration, unemployment, and intergenerational injustice. Beyond its direct effects on smallholder agriculture, it is clear that land inequality undermines stability and the development of sustainable societies, affecting all of us in almost every aspect of our lives.

Land is a common good, providing water, food, and natural resources that sustain all life. It is the guarantor of biodiversity, health, resilience, and equitable and sustainable livelihoods. It is immovable, non-renewable, and inextricably connected to people and societies. How we manage and control land has shaped our economies, political structures, communities, cultures, and beliefs for thousands of years.

Despite the centrality of land inequality to so many global challenges, and despite global recognition of the fundamental importance of secure and equitable land rights in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests (VGGTs), inequalities in rights to land and the distribution of benefits from it are on the increase, while unsustainable land use is placing a huge burden on those least able to bear it.

The "uneven ground" alluded to in the title of this synthesis report is where the majority of rural people are increasingly finding themselves. They are the focus of this report and of the work of the International Land Coalition. Smallholders and family farms, indigenous people, rural women, youth, and landless rural communities are being squeezed into smaller parcels of land or forced off the land altogether, while more and more land is concentrated in fewer hands, mainly serving the interests of corporate agribusiness and distant investors, utilising industrial models of production that employ fewer and fewer people.

This report sheds new light on the scale and speed of this growing land inequality. It provides the most comprehensive picture available today, informed by 17 specially commissioned research papers as well as analysis of existing data and literature. It lays out in detail the causes and consequences of land inequality, analyses potential solutions, and offers a potential pathway to change.

While there are still significant gaps in our knowledge, not least about the extent of corporate and financial interests in the world's land, it is clear that land inequality is greater and is increasing much more rapidly than we thought. The need to address this is urgent, and it is in all our interests to do so.

Why land inequality matters

Historically, land inequality is tied to legacies of colonialism, conquest, and division, and in many parts of the world it is a politically charged issue. From the early twentieth century through to the 1960s and 1970s, agrarian policies with a focus on small-scale producers and family farmers, together with land redistribution policies implemented by a number of governments, resulted in the main global measures of land inequality recording a slow but steady fall.

However, since the 1980s, land inequality has once again been on the rise. The reasons are discussed in this synthesis report but, in summary, it results largely from large-scale industrial farming models supported by market-led policies and open economies prioritising agricultural exports, as well as increased corporate and financial sector investments in food and agriculture, and the weakness of existing institutions and mechanisms to resist growing land concentration.

A key outcome of the current trend is an increasingly polarised land and agri-food system, with growing inequalities between the smallest landholders and the largest. Globally dominant food systems are controlled by a small number of corporations and financial institutions, driven by the logic of return on large-scale investments through economies of scale. At the other end of the spectrum are locally dominant agri-food systems, largely made up of small-scale producers and family farmers, connected to particular pieces of land. These are not completely separate systems; there are many points of intersection, but they represent two approaches that are moving further and further apart.

The embeddedness of land inequality with other inequalities, and of land inequality with global crises and trends, involves a complex system of interconnections. Land inequality manifests itself in numerous ways, whether social, economic, political, environmental, or territorial. Most of these manifestations are inter-related and influence one another, resulting in the major global crises and trends that we see today.

Land inequality is fundamentally related to political inequality, particularly in societies where accumulation of land conveys political power. This feeds elite control and increases income, wealth, and asset inequalities. When the quality of institutions is low, policies that support the powerful tend to find favour while policies that benefit the poor, the landless, smallholders, indigenous people, women, and family farmers do not. Also, highly concentrated land ownership or control can subvert political processes and thwart efforts at fairer redistribution. In this way, land inequality ultimately weakens democracy.

Unemployment and reduced incomes are further results of land inequality, with critical implications for developing countries that have large youth populations. Large industrialised farms absorb fewer workers overall and tend to casualise the workforce, pushing real wages down. Especially in Africa, where agriculture is still the largest employer and youth unemployment is a major challenge, the unfettered continuation of current land inequality trends would create a social and economic disaster of massive proportions.

Climate change is both a cause and a consequence of land inequality, reducing agricultural productivity in parts of the world and forcing many off the land altogether. And while large-scale, environmentally damaging monocultures contribute to climate change, the more sustainable land use practices of small-scale farmers and indigenous peoples are threatened by evictions, deforestation, biodiversity loss, and excessive pressure on water and other natural resources.

There are strong connections between land inequality, changes in agricultural practices, global health security, and the spread of disease. COVID-19 is the latest zoonotic disease to emerge from a combination of unsanitary animal farming and pressure on land and wildlife populations, exacerbated by the same drivers that fuel land inequality. COVID-19 has also contributed to land inequality through dispossession in more heavily policed societies.

Migration has long been a coping strategy for people faced with poverty, poor living conditions, social exclusion, and lack of opportunities – all factors that arise from unequal access to land. Mass and forced migration is also a response to conflict, displacement, climate change, and unstable democracies, and is driven or aggravated by land inequality.

Land inequality is inextricably related to social exclusion and intergenerational justice. Rural women and youth face multiple challenges linked to land inequality, including reduced access to land and employment prospects, exacerbated by climate change. Land inequality hence has implications for social exclusion and disempowerment, structurally reducing opportunities for younger rural generations, especially girls, to improve their lives in the long term.

Ending poverty and hunger, ensuring good health and well-being, decent livelihoods, gender equality, climate action, peace, and strong institutions are thus all dependent to some extent on addressing land inequality. Without addressing land inequality of all kinds, it will not be possible to achieve inclusive and sustainable development that leaves no one behind.

There is clear evidence that small-scale and family farmers and indigenous peoples generally produce more net value per unit area than large enterprises, and their land use practices tend to support biodiversity and healthier soils, forests, and water supplies. Women's land rights and collective land rights are particularly important in this context. Driven by the logic of heritage and stewardship rather than short-term profits, they have much to offer the global objectives of equitable and sustainable development, yet they are increasingly excluded while global trends favour land concentration.

Land inequality - the shocking reality

The traditional measurement of land inequality – the Gini coefficient for land distribution based on household surveys recording ownership and area of holdings by size – provides a useful long-term perspective on land inequality across countries. However, it paints only a partial picture that does not take into account the multi-dimensional nature of land (tenure, quality, assets), nor does it reflect multiple land holdings or actual control over land, nor does it include the landless. In the framework of this Land Inequality Initiative, these data have now been complemented by innovative methodologies, implemented using a sample of 17 countries. The results indicate that land inequality is much worse than previously thought.

Today, it is estimated that there are approximatley 608 million farms in the world, and most are still family farms. However, the largest 1% of farms operate more than 70% of the world's farmland and are integrated into the corporate food system, while over 80% are smallholdings of less than two hectares that are generally excluded from global food chains. Although patterns vary significantly from region to region, since 1980 in all regions land concentration has either been increasing significantly (North America, Europe, Asia and the Pacific) or a decreasing trend has been reversed (Africa and Latin America). In most low-income countries, we see an increasing number of farms in combination with smaller and smaller farm sizes, while in higher-income countries large farms are getting bigger.

By taking into account multiple ownership of plots, land values, and the landless population, research conducted for this project concludes that land inequality has thus far been significantly underestimated. Overall, research carried out for this project has found that the top 10% of rural populations across the sampled countries capture 60% of agricultural land value, while the bottom 50% of rural populations, who are generally more dependent on agriculture, capture only 3% of land value (Bauluz et al., 2020). Compared with traditional census data, this shows an increase in rural land inequality of 41% when agricultural land value and landlessness are taken into account, and an increase of 24% if value only is considered.

These new estimates also provide important new insights into international patterns of land inequality. Although Latin America remains the most unequal region, land inequality in the Asian and African countries sampled increases proportionally more when land value and landless populations are included. Asian countries that appeared moderately equal under traditional measures (such as India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan) have among the highest levels of inequality when land value and the landless population are included. China and Vietnam, by contrast, display higher levels of land inequality among landowners than South Asia and Africa, but land concentration is only slightly higher when land value and landless households are considered. Africa has the lowest levels of land area inequality among landowners, but this rises significantly when land values and landless populations are included.

Hidden hands - the unseen drivers of land inequality

The findings on land inequality reported here are almost certainly an understatement, as none of the available data show how much land is controlled or operated by corporate entities and investment funds, even though their operations clearly involve significant interests in land across different countries.

These less visible forms of control do not necessarily require ownership. Contract farming, for example, can incorporate land into supply chains, creating new dependencies and perpetuating extractive models. There is increasing corporate concentration of ownership and control throughout the agri-food sector, which influences the way that land is used. Furthermore, the growing role of financial markets and actors treats land as an asset class and can significantly change the way that it is controlled and used.

In the agri-food sector, corporate organisation is linked to industrial modes of primary production, which seek advantages of scale. In addition, through horizontal and vertical integration, these actors control large sections of specific value chains, often all the way from seeds via inputs to retail, enabling them to exercise significant control over the land to reap maximum value, and contributing indirectly to land inequality.

Concentration of control is compounded by increased interest in agricultural land from the financial sector. Parts of the world's farmland are now considered financial assets, with no known physical owner, subject to decision-making processes that may be external to the farm. Instruments such as shareholdings and the use of derivative values detach investments from their material base, and can bring greater instability to agricultural markets and put speculative pressures on land and agricultural products. Among the asset managers and private equity firms involved in farm investments are the biggest managed funds in the world, which also have substantial investments in major supermarket groups as well in the world's largest seed companies and livestock breeders.

Complex corporate and financial structures and cross-shareholdings mean that clear lines of responsibility for land use and management are becoming harder to discern, just as they are becoming more important. It is also difficult to hold investors to account for their economic, social, and environmental impacts when primary investors are unknown or geographically and institutionally remote from the land in question.

Land inequality solutions for effective change

The policies and measures presented in this synthesis report are not exhaustive. Nor is there any “one size fits all” solution. Instead, this report offers a number of measures to build on and adapt for specific contexts, regions, or countries, while noting that the land sector is in constant and accelerated transformation and mitigation measures will always have to be adapted over time.

It is important to emphasise that land redistribution efforts alone will fail to ensure sustainable livelihoods, let alone prosperity, for the majority of rural people. A range of measures is needed, including redistributive programmes, regulatory reforms, taxation, and accountability measures, not only in relation to land but across the agri-food sector, from inputs to retailing. Such interventions will entail redressing the power imbalances affecting land and the agri-food sector, while also supporting more equitable relations between people and the land.

Agrarian land redistribution reforms have played a decisive role in a few countries, but they have usually required exceptional social and political upheaval to succeed. To be effective, and to prevent a return to land inequality over time, agrarian reforms should be based on long-term political goals that are aligned with a country’s overall socioeconomic trajectory, embracing broad-based structural change. They should also consider the socioeconomic needs of intended beneficiaries, such as access to credit, support services, and infrastructure.

Regulation covers a range of measures governing land transfers, ownership, use, and control. This should include regulation of institutional ownership and control mechanisms of land through sophisticated financial instruments, including listed and unlisted funds. Effective land market regulation needs governance institutions with a public purpose, reflecting collective rights, and the ability to act with a certain degree of autonomy. This way the market can be integrated into society and controlled by institutions including representatives of the inhabitants of a territory.

Land taxes can be a progressive instrument in addressing land inequality. Effectively used, they can discourage accumulation, reduce speculation, and constrain intergenerational transmission of inequality. They can also provide a predictable source of revenue that can be used for investment in infrastructure and public services. Obstacles to land taxes may be political or may be due to lack of information on land ownership, transactions, and changes in value.

Strengthening corporate and investor accountability in relation to land is unlikely to happen without enforcement. While positive aspirations are set out in mechanisms such as the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights and the OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises, change will only happen with compulsory compliance and reporting to live up to the standards expressed in them. Ultimately, there is a need for stronger national laws and policy frameworks that compel investors to follow the highest due diligence standards and human rights and environmental protection standards. There is also a need to support more independent and innovative monitoring of companies and investors operating in agriculture and land-related activities, as well as of shareholding and control of production.

Any solutions to land inequality must address horizontal land inequality, which particularly affects women and groups who hold collective land rights. Secure collective rights protect the well-being, livelihoods, and ability to retain land of mostly indigenous peoples and local communities, and reinforce the stewardship role that these populations and territories play with regard to climate change, global biodiversity management, bio-cultural conservation, and justice, including territorial and gender justice. It is vitally important to require respect for free, prior, and informed consent (FPIC) from communities. Securing women’s land rights is equally important and challenging, including for communally held land. Achieving gender equality in land rights requires a complex combination of actions, including legal reform and adaptation of social norms and attitudes and behaviours.

Change will be hard, but not impossible. Counter-movements and collective action are emerging in response to land inequality, endeavouring to make current production models and value chains fairer to farmers and more inclusive. Agro-ecological movements have also grown significantly, defending the land rights of independent family farmers and pushing for change, as well as implementing different practices on the land.

A pathway to change

Despite the vital importance of land inequality, the tools to address it remain weakly implemented and vested interests in existing land distribution patterns are strong and hard to shift, particularly in the face of structural factors driving inequality.

Nevertheless, change is necessary. The urgency of addressing land inequality is fuelled by the same urgency with which people are demanding action on other interconnected challenges: climate and environmental crises, poverty, disease, and threats to democracy. This same sense of urgency is seeing communities taking small steps towards building more sustainable food and agriculture systems, helping to build more cohesive societies, and making them more resilient.

However, reversing land inequality to any significant extent will require a deep transformation in power relations. Solutions will require major changes in political, economic, and legal norms. They will require action that strikes at the root of what makes societies and economies unequal and unsustainable. This will take considerable effort by rural people’s organisations, indigenous peoples, civil society, policy-makers, and corporate and financial sector leaders. Inclusive processes will have to be created, giving all stakeholders a voice, especially the most vulnerable.

The new knowledge coming from this Land Inequality Initiative aims to support this change process, and inform advocacy and campaigning actions as well as the establishment of a longer-term facility to measure and monitor land inequality globally. Ultimately, an alternative future, envisaged by all those contributing to this work, will be driven by new visions of human well-being and planetary flourishing. How we use, share, and manage land, water, and natural resources is at the heart of this vision.

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"Land can be a major engine of shared prosperity or one of the most pervasive drivers of inequality."

Guereña and Wegerif, 2019: 1

1 INTRODUCTION

Why land inequality matters

Land is important not only for the people who directly depend on it – but for us all. It provides essential common goods like biodiversity, water, and other natural resources. As such, just and equitable access to and use of land contribute to a stable climate, food security, gender justice, and more peaceful and equal societies for the benefit of present and future generations (Guereña and Wegerif, 2019).

In the second half of the twentieth century, a prevailing view was that inequality created incentives for progress, especially in the early stages of economic development, and that market economies would self-correct over time (Kuznets, 1955; 1963). Today, it is clear that inequality is detrimental to the stability and development of sustainable economic systems and that it undermines the health of democracies (OECD, 2014; Stevans, 2012; Stiglitz, 2012; Easterly, 2007). Land inequality is no exception. Land inequality, along with other forms of inequality, leads to the concentration of political power, driving further wealth accumulation and jeopardising equitable and inclusive socio-economic development (Giridharadas, 2018; Guereña, 2016).

Land inequality sits at the heart of other forms of inequality. It is fundamentally related and often central to broader inequalities, such as wealth inequality, political inequality, social inequality, gender inequality, environmental inequality, and spatial inequality, in particular in agrarian societies.

Land inequality also underlies contemporary global crises and trends, as reflected in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It can worsen democratic decline (SDG 16), climate and environmental crises (SDGs 13, 15), the risk of pandemic diseases (SDGs 3, 6), mass migration (SDG 10), unemployment (SDG 8), and intergenerational injustice (SDG 16). Land inequality affects well-being, livelihoods, and opportunities for all of us, and it further jeopardises the stewardship role that equitable land distribution can play with regard to these broader global trends and crises. Furthermore, land inequality is core to almost every SDG.

Figure 1: Land and land equality are core to achieving the SDGs

Source: ILC, 2019.

Without addressing land inequality, it will not be possible to achieve inclusive and sustainable development that "leaves no one behind".

What the available evidence tells us, however, is that land inequality is rising in most countries in the world. Worse, in addition to this increase, new measures of land inequality developed in the framework of this Land Inequality Initiative indicate that land concentration is on average 41% higher than previously reported. They find that the wealthiest 10% of the rural population across sampled countries capture 60% of agricultural land value, while the poorest 50% of the rural population, who are generally more dependent on agriculture, control only 3% of land value (Bauluz et al., 2020).

Land inequality also manifests itself in numerous hidden forms – not only as direct land accumulation, but also through other mechanisms allowing control over land and the appropriation of value from the land and activities on it (Wegerif and Anseeuw, 2020). Land inequality is therefore not only more opaque and difficult to monitor; it is also more concentrated than we previously thought.

Small producers, peasants, and indigenous peoples – who generally produce more net value per unit area than large companies, and whose land use practices also tend to support biodiversity, healthier soils, forests, and water supplies – should be central to equitable and sustainable development, yet are increasingly excluded while global trends favour land concentration. The worsening state of land inequality causes conflict and further jeopardises access to land, land rights, control over land, decision-making capacity regarding land, and, subsequently, the living conditions of those who live and depend on the land. These people are often the most vulnerable, such as small-scale farmers, pastoralists, indigenous people, women and girls, the landless, the elderly, and the young (De Schutter, 2011). Many of them depend (or depended) on collective land rights for their livelihoods.

Land inequality cannot be ignored. The importance of secure and equitable land rights is broadly acknowledged, including in international frameworks and declarations such as the SDGs, the Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure (VGGTs), the Framework and Guidelines (F&Gs) on Land Policy in Africa, the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), and others.
The current trends in land inequality, however, underscore the need to go beyond the mechanisms that historically have enabled human societies to control the development of these inequalities.

A rethinking of land redistribution, land taxation, market regulations, and investor accountability, together with innovative and inclusive development models, will be necessary in light of contemporary circumstances for more resilient, sustainable, and equitable societies overall.

The challenge is to bring about real change, and to do that requires far more information, quality data, and transparency. To contribute to charting a new path, members and partners of the International Land Coalition (ILC) have launched the Land Inequality Initiative. Its aims are to develop more reliable data on land inequality among agrarian populations worldwide; to provide evidence and analysis that allow us to better understand land inequality and its complex and inter-related linkages with wider inequalities; and to equip those working for a fairer distribution of land with the concepts and tools to do so more effectively.

This report is a synthesis of the main findings of the research phase of the Land Inequality Initiative and it aims to offer insights, data, and tools to understand and measure land inequality, and to better respond to the challenges it poses on the ground.

Land inequality and the International Land Coalition

ILC is a global alliance of civil society and intergovernmental organisations. Among its more than 250 members, strongly held and diverse perspectives exist on land inequality and its implications. However, ILC's members share a common aim of promoting secure and equitable access to and control over land for all, particularly for poor women and men. ILC members, including organisations that play a lead role within the multilateral system on land governance and broader sustainability, agree on a common vision:

> *"We will work towards encouraging models of investment in agriculture and other rural land-based activities that are socially, economically and environmentally sustainable and that reduce poverty and hunger. We will contribute towards strengthening the capacities of local land-users, indigenous peoples, agricultural workers and their organisations, and creating incentives for more investments in and by small-scale producers rather than large-scale land transfers or concessions. We believe that such investments and the fight against poverty must go hand in hand, and must be closely linked to secure and equitable land rights for small-scale producers, who should be recognised as the main investors in land and agriculture." (See ILC's goals at: https://www.landcoalition.org/en/explore/our-collective-goal/)*

Box 1: A focus on rural inequality

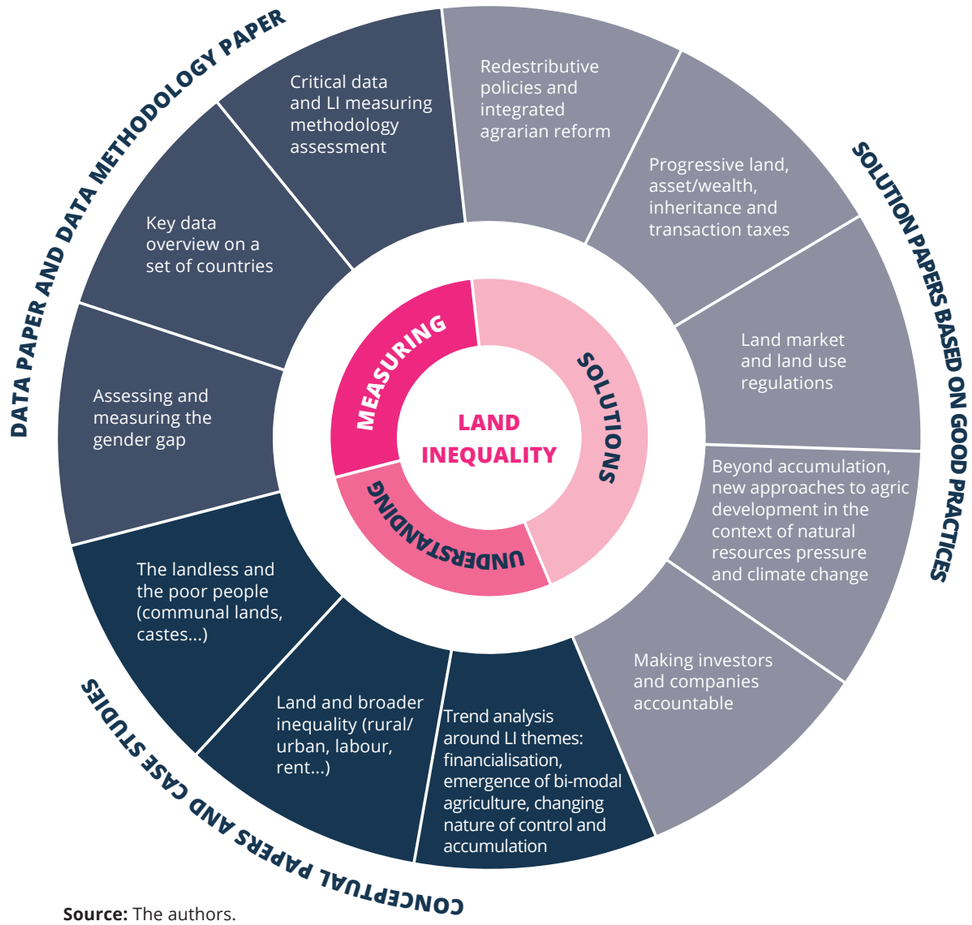
Land inequality is related to poverty, inequitable economic growth, food insecurity, climate change, gender injustice, and social conflict in both rural and urban settings. With an awareness of the links between land and the urban dimensions of inequality, ILC and the Land Inequality Initiative focus mainly on rural land, as the Coalition is accountable primarily to the people who live on and from the land. An important and growing proportion of ILC's membership directly represents family farmers, rural women, and indigenous peoples.

Methodology

The Land Inequality Initiative was launched in 2019, by a broad consortium coordinated by ILC. An initial Framing Document was developed by experts, based on a review of relevant literature, and enacted by a reference group of internationally renowned specialists on issues related to land inequality. The Framework outlined the main trends and drivers of land inequality, identified and discussed the main challenges and gaps in its measurement, and developed the future orientation and methodology of the project.

In line with the methodological framework, papers were commissioned on a range of topics, supported by eight case studies, a data paper, a data methodology paper, and five papers focused on solutions to land inequality (see list at the back of the report). These papers were researched and written by institutions and authors identified through an open call, and were aimed at upscaling and disseminating both existing and innovative work on land inequality and promoting experiences, knowledge, and research from the field developed by experts and by grassroots organisations.

Figure 2: The Land Inequality research framework



Source: The authors.

This synthesis report captures the main findings from these studies, complemented by a range of key resources, mainly academic literature and publications from international organisations and civil society, highlighting the gravity of the current situation and the necessary attention that land inequality and inequality overall deserve (for example, Oxfam, 2020a; 2020b; 2019; 2017; UNDESA, 2020; UNDP, 2019, besides many others).

The new knowledge coming from the ILC Land Inequality Initiative will inform future advocacy and campaigning actions and the establishment of a longer-term facility to measure and monitor land inequality globally.

Photo: ©ILC/Tria Rifki

"When holders of capital are heavily reliant on a highly specific asset, the threat of expropriation is higher, as is elite resistance to democracy."

Ziblatt (2008: 616), referring to Boix (2003)

2 FRAMING LAND INEQUALITY, ITS CENTRALITY, AND ITS IMPACT

Land Inequality is complex and multidimensional

Land inequality encompasses a number of concepts, measures, and facts. This synthesis report breaks new ground by bringing together the many facets of land inequality and analysing them comprehensively. Research presented in this report draws on a wider range of measures than is usually applied to land equality, and examines how land inequality links to pressing global issues, including power and democracy crises, poverty and unemployment, intergenerational justice and migration, climate crises and environmental degradation, and global health security and pandemics.

Historically, land inequality has been measured in terms of differences in land ownership.

However, thorough investigation of land inequality requires us to study many more dimensions of land use and control. These include:

- the size and/or value of land that people access or hold;
- the level of security of tenure that people have;
- the quality of land, its characteristics, and assets that may be on it;
- the actual control that people have, including decision-making power over land;
- the control of benefits derived from the land, including the ability to appropriate value from it.

Land inequality is both vertical and horizontal.

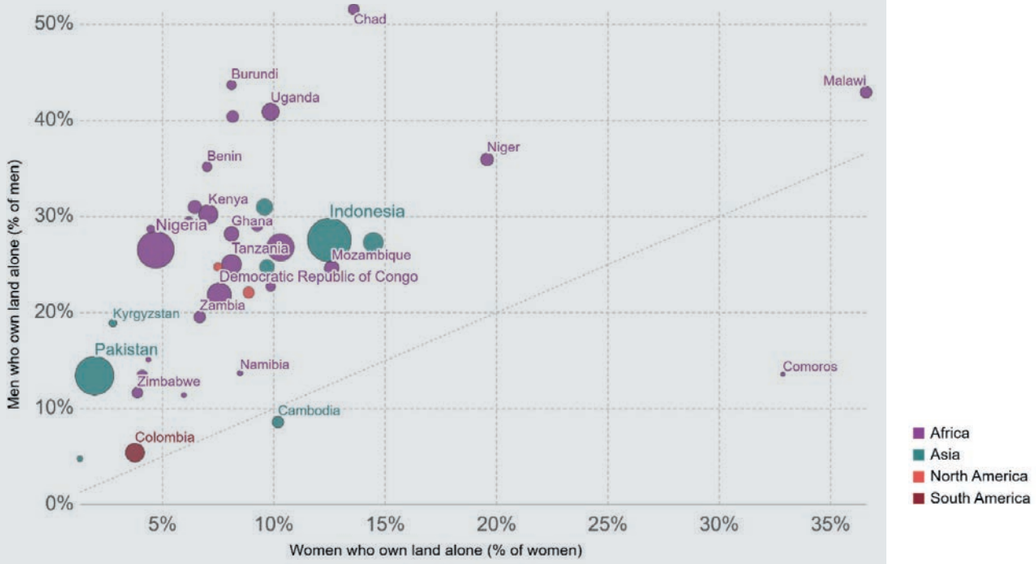
Vertical inequality focuses on the distribution of land among individuals, usually owners or those who directly control land. This is not enough. It is also essential to consider horizontal land inequality on the basis of factors such as gender, ethnicity, and culture.

Box 2: Gender inequality in land rights

Around the world, there is a clear male bias in land rights. With few exceptions, women have rights to less land than men and to land of lesser quality. They are often unable to acquire or exercise the same rights as men in the same context, their rights are less secure, and it is harder for them to protect their rights when they are under threat. These patterns of inequality relate to gender-unequal social and power relations and affect women's ability to convert the benefits of land into improved economic and social well-being. They also influence decision-making in the major sites of power in society (household, kin group, community, state).

Gender equality is a critical aspiration, yet in land rights the concept of equality can be poorly aligned with land tenure regimes, especially those that are based on culturally defined roles and relationships for men and women or tenets of communal support and reciprocity, or on spirituality. Such tenure regimes underpin many indigenous claims to self-determination. While they are locally legitimate, culturally appropriate and relevant, and often under threat from outside interests or reform processes, these tenure regimes can also be the source of gender discrimination.

Figure 3: Land ownership, men vs women, 2016



Source: World Bank, Population (Gapminder, HYDE 2016 & UN 2019), Our World In Data.

Seeking gender equality in land should be understood not as replacing one tenure regime with another, nor to destroy important social relationships, but instead to ensure that women and men have equal access to the opportunities that land rights confer, and that women's and men's land rights have equal protection and treatment so that everyone can realise their full potential.

Source: Scalise (2020).

Land inequality is structural and market-related.

Land inequality is not inevitable but is the result of political decisions, market forces, or a combination of both. Structural land inequality derives from historical or present circumstances such as conquest, colonisation, and land distribution by colonial powers or by the state. In this form, it is common in Latin America and South Africa. Market forces also drive land inequality by encouraging accumulation, often by those who are already powerful and wealthy.

Land inequality is a cause and a consequence of other inequalities.

Land inequality is shaped by economic, political, social, spatial, and environmental factors, which in turn it also influences. This interconnectedness means that addressing land inequality requires an all-encompassing, cross-sectoral approach. It also means that tackling land inequality will have a wide range of positive implications for our planet's broader inequalities and crises.

Land inequality is central to other forms of inequality, and to many global crises and trends

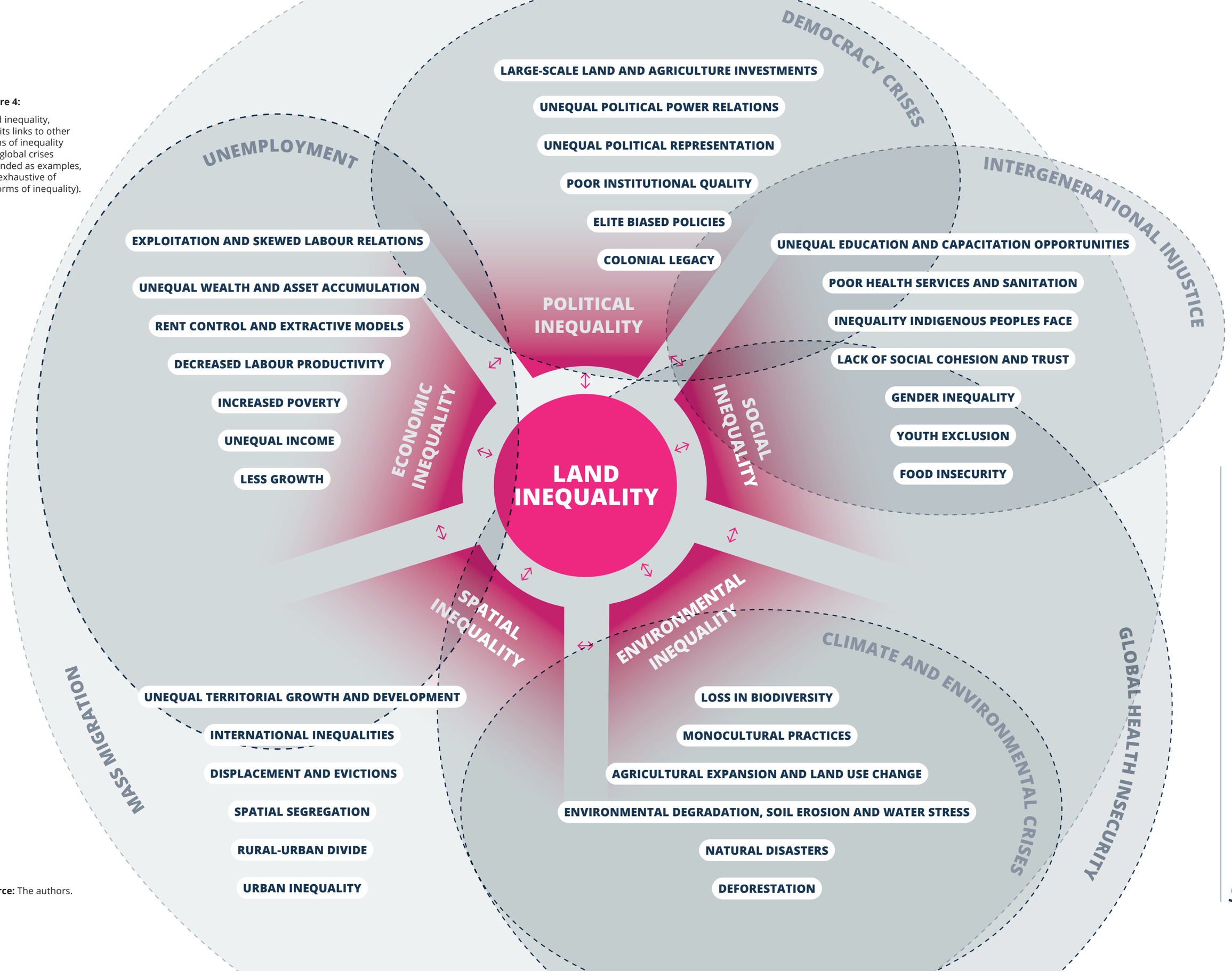
The embeddedness of land inequality with other inequalities, and of land inequality with global crises and trends, involves a complex system of interconnections.

Land inequality manifests itself in numerous ways, whether social, economic, political, environmental, or territorial. Most of these manifestations are inter-related and influence one another even across inequalities, resulting in the major global crises and trends that we see today.

The manifestations of land and broader inequalities presented here are identified through the various works in the Land Inequality Initiative, and complemented with broader literature. They are not exhaustive of all issues related to land inequality, such as conflict, dispossession, poverty, and many others that have been well described (*Box 3*). The issues presented do demonstrate how they relate to a number of key contemporary crises that our world faces today, ultimately linking these trends and crises to land inequality.

Figure 4:

Land inequality, and its links to other forms of inequality and global crises (intended as examples, not exhaustive of all forms of inequality).



Source: The authors.

LAND INEQUALITIES UNEVEN GROUND: LAND INEQUALITY AT THE HEART OF UNEQUAL SOCIETIES

Box 3: Land inequality and violent conflict - a self-perpetuating cycle

Violent conflict over land is well documented and is closely linked to land inequality. Not only do increasing land concentration and land inequality fuel violent conflict; conflict is also a driver of land inequality, which, if not adequately addressed, perpetuates the cycle of violence.

When combined with economic and political differences, land inequality can cause deep resentment, leading to violent struggles that can last for many decades, and are often characterised by forced displacements and resettlement, lack of equitable remedy, and threats to social bonds and cohesion (Stewart, 2010). Examples are numerous, including in the framework of this project, as illustrated by the armed conflicts in Colombia and the displacement of nearly eight million people and large-scale dispossessions of their land (Espinosa Rincón and Jaramillo Gómez, 2020). Others include brutal civil wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone, conflict over land and natural resources in Nigeria and Sudan, the Rwandan genocide, rural resistance to urban expansion in China, and so on – all arguably have their origins in land inequality, and in political and economic inequality.

Not only are conflicts associated with land and natural resources numerous and frequent, they are often protracted and twice as likely to relapse in the first five years as other types of conflict. Despite ceasefires or peace agreements, societies affected by land-related conflict often remain mired in insecurity, poverty, and persistence of the factors that sparked violent conflict in the first place. These conflicts are further fuelled by the contemporary crises described in this synthesis report such as climate change, democratic crisis, and mass migration, which are further breeding grounds for political, economic, social, and environmental instability.

2.2.1 Land inequality and the democracy crisis

Land inequality is fundamentally related to political inequality, particularly in societies where accumulation of land conveys political power.

In rural societies, elites may control formal and informal decision-making processes over land, with reduced or no representation of the poor and smaller farmers and landowners. This feeds elite control and increases income, wealth, and asset (including land) inequalities. From land accumulation within undemocratic tribal systems in South Africa (Claassens and Cousins, 2008), to land corruption at the highest political levels in Kenya (O'Brien, 2012), to the perversion of public land distribution by landed elites in Colombia (Espinosa Rincón and Jaramillo Gómez, 2020) – examples are numerous all over the world. These unequal structures often also link to rent-seeking behaviour from public, or what are often considered public, assets, such as land in collective tenure systems (Alden Wily, 2008; 2010).

When institutional quality is low, the rich wield even stronger political influence. Weak institutions, together with the under-representation of poorer segments of the population, lead to a systematic underinvestment in policies that benefit the poor, smallholders, and family farmers. Instead, incentives and tax systems tend to benefit large-scale domestic and international farm enterprises, corporate engagement, and large-scale land investments and acquisitions.

Box 4: Senegal's GOANA - an example of elite capture of policy and processes

In March 2004, after more than two years of consultations with development partners, civil society, producer groups, and several ministries within government, Senegal launched the Loi d'Orientation Agro-Sylvo-Pastorale (LOASP), a grand vision for agriculture which promoted the modernisation of the country over the next 20 years, with a strong focus on the family farming sector and the reduction of poverty and inequalities between farmers and between rural and urban populations. However, in 2008, before the LOASP had been fully implemented, then President Abdoulaye Wade inaugurated the Great Agricultural Offensive for Food and Abundance (GOANA). Amid food security worries precipitated by a poor harvest and volatile world markets, the stated aim of GOANA was for Senegal to attain self-sufficiency by 2015, predominantly by attracting private, large-scale investments. By 2010, over 657,000 hectares or around 17% of Senegal's arable land had been allocated to 17 private firms, mainly concentrated in northern parts of the country. Ten of the firms were Senegalese and the rest were foreign. The GOANA case illustrates how easily powerful elites, both national and international, are able to ignore inclusive policy processes in favour of alternative development models based on large-scale land acquisitions and accumulation.

Source: Wegerif and Anseeuw (2020).

The case of GOANA in Senegal (*Box 4*) is just one example of how land inequality weakens democracy.

Highly concentrated land ownership or control often subverts political processes and thwarts fairer redistribution efforts (Acemoglu and Robinson, 2000; Boix, 2003).

LAND INEQUALITIES UNEVEN GROUND: LAND INEQUALITY AT THE HEART OF UNEQUAL SOCIETIES

2.2.2 Land inequality and unemployment

There is a direct correlation between land inequality and economic inequality in agrarian societies. In simple terms, those with more land of higher value are wealthier than those with less land or none at all. However, land inequality has a much longer tail, also negatively affecting rates and distribution of growth, income generation, and wealth accumulation (Berg et al., 2018).

In the longer term, land inequality is detrimental to human development, socio-political stability, and environmental sustainability (OECD, 2014; Stevans, 2012; Stiglitz, 2012; Easterly, 2007).

Further studies find that land inequality perpetuates poverty (ILO, 2019) well beyond the agricultural sector and creates an unequal distribution of industrial assets that persists over time (Carter, 2000).

In rural societies, power and wealth may also be increased by means of "accumulation by dispossession" and the extraction of profit through multiple forms of rent capture from land and labour (Sokoloff and Engerman, 2000; Wegerif and Guereña, 2019; Cochet, 2018). Illustrative of this process is the global large-scale land acquisition trend that surged in 2010. This land rush led to 26.7 million hectares of mainly collectively held land being acquired by national and international companies, generally with the support and engagement of domestic elites (Land Matrix, 2018; Anseeuw et al., 2012).

Those driven off the land, whether through forces of accumulation, dispossession, or environmental disaster, lose their major source of livelihood. Unemployment and reduced income are therefore common results of land inequality.

In addition, when large farms dominate the agricultural sector, labour becomes more salaried and labour relations are often skewed and casualised, pushing real wages down (Wegerif and Guereña, 2019). Women are particularly vulnerable to casualisation of labour on farms (Barrientos, 2001: 91), while increased industrialisation as average farm sizes increase reduces employment opportunities overall. Depending on the type of production, labour absorption rates are from one (for the most labour-intensive types of production, such as horticulture) to 25 and even 100 times (for cereals, for example) less in industrialised farm models compared with family farms (Burnod et al., 2018; Cochet et al., 2015). In many low-income countries, where agriculture is still the largest employer and few other opportunities exist, the unfettered realisation of this trend risks creating a social and economic disaster of massive proportions (***Box 5***).

Box 5: Land inequality, the youth bulge, and unemployment in Africa

Sub-Saharan Africa faces a dramatic "job challenge" to generate employment for its young, rapidly growing population. The numbers are huge. The annual cohort of youth reaching working age was around 19 million in 2015, and is expected to reach 28 million in 2030 and to total 375 million over 15 years (Losch, 2016). This is as large as the current population of Canada and the United States combined. Based on the existing distribution of population and trends in migration to cities, 60% (about 220 million) of these workers are likely to be from rural areas. How will the continent's economies absorb their booming labour forces and, specifically, deal with youth (un) employment? This question is all the more important in the context of increasing land inequality and the promotion and proliferation of large-scale agricultural development models which are capital-intensive, liberating – not absorbing – and even displacing labour forces.

2.2.3 Land inequality and the climate crisis

Climate change is a driver of global inequality, including land inequality. It is already driving down agricultural productivity and driving some people from the land altogether (FAO, 2017).

Conversely, land inequality is associated with environmental pressures that contribute to climate change, such as the growth of large-scale, environmentally damaging monocultures that maximise economies of scale (Ceddia, 2019; Sant'Anna 2016; Tole, 2004). At the same time, the more sustainable land use practices of small-scale producers, family farmers and indigenous peoples are threatened by land evictions, deforestation, biodiversity loss, and excessive pressure on natural resources such as water and soil (IFAD, 2018; Borras et al., 2012; Bailey, 2011).

Although mitigation actions such as the promotion of green energy, hydroelectric projects, or biofuel production may have positive effects on climate change, they can push people off their land, divert or deplete water sources, and cause deforestation and environmental destruction (for example, the expansion of monocultures for biofuels – see ***Box 6***) (UNDESA, 2020). Such pressures will likely be magnified by the increasing demand for land for carbon sequestration linked to the achievement of "net zero" emissions targets by both countries and companies. In this sense, even environmental policies aiming to respond to climate change, if not designed and implemented carefully, can further exacerbate land inequality, particularly in developing countries.

Box 6: Land inequality and large-scale monocultures

In Brazil, the increasing interest in land, especially in areas where agricultural frontiers are expanding and agribusiness is advancing, is driving the dispossession of traditional communities, including by forced and sometimes violent and illegal methods. The transfer of public lands to private actors for large-scale monocultures has led to contamination of the environment and privatisation of access to water. For example, in Santa Filomena in Piaui state, large-scale soy production has led to the contamination and depletion of water sources, depriving surrounding rural communities of good-quality water (Kato and Furtado, 2020). At country level, this has generated violence and conflict, with 1,833 cases of conflict related to land and water in 2019 alone. Over the past decade, Brazil has also recorded one of the highest murder rates in the world of land and environmental defenders (Global Witness, 2020).

In Colombia, the establishment of agri-businesses has reduced production of sustainable food crops like traditional tubers, pulses, and grains and has limited many rural communities' access to land and water. In Montes de María and Oriente Antioqueño, where oil palm and floriculture for export flourish in the favourable climate, widespread use of agrochemicals and, particularly in the case of flower production, water contamination lead to negative consequences for the livelihoods and health of small-scale farmers and agri-business workers (Espinosa Rincón and Jaramillo Gómez, 2020).

Sources: Kato and Furtado (2020); Espinosa Rincón and Jaramillo Gómez (2020).

2.2.4 Land inequality, global health security, and pandemics

There are strong connections between land inequality, changes in agricultural practices such as increased monocropping, and poor health and the spread of disease.

COVID-19 is the latest zoonotic disease to emerge from a combination of unsanitary animal farming and pressure on wildlife populations. While its main impact has been on urban populations, COVID-19 has further exposed inequalities faced by land-disadvantaged groups, such as indigenous peoples, lower castes, the elderly, women, youth, and migrants, as well as casual workers (common in agribusiness) and landless tenants (UNDP, 2020; FAO, 2020; ILC, 2020). Land inequality diminishes resilience to disease shocks and, at a household level, may lead to loss of shelter and lack of access to infrastructure and services, traditional community networks, and institutions of social reciprocity. Women's resilience and coping strategies are limited by weaker land rights, which puts them at even greater disadvantage in these situations, with a knock-on effect on children and youth in their households (FAO, 2020; FAO, IFAD and UNIDO, 2016).

Land grabbing and forced evictions have been documented in the context of COVID-19 (ILC, 2020), exacerbating land and land rights inequalities, particularly in societies that are heavily policed.

2.2.5 Land inequality and migration

Migration has always been an adaptation strategy for humans, including for people affected by land inequality, for whom it is a common coping strategy. Poverty, displacement, poor living conditions, social exclusion, and lack of opportunities often arise from unequal access to land. Migration is also a response to conflict, climate change, and unstable democracies – all related in one way or another, as we have seen, to land inequality. Overall, land inequality – through its interconnectedness with social, economic, environmental, and spatial inequalities – influences people's resilience and capacity to react (IOM and UNCCD, 2019; Obeng-Odoom, 2017), with migration often being a last resort.

Box 7: Land inequality feeds other inequalities through migration

In Costa Rica between 1984 and 2014, the land area used for export crops such as pineapple, palm oil, melon, orange, and cassava increased from 26,000 to 151,000 hectares; this was accompanied by greater concentration of land ownership and reduced state support for small and medium-scale farmers. The expansion of agribusiness has also seen an increase in labour migration from neighbouring countries, with about 30% of Costa Rica's agricultural workforce coming from Nicaragua, where demographic growth from the 1960s to the 2000s, small farm sizes, and landlessness have been strong drivers of migration. These workers are often hired informally and underpaid, while Costa Rican rural workers have shifted to non-agricultural activities in urban areas, contributing to uncontrolled urbanisation (Baumeister, 2020).

Similar trends are evident in Peru, particularly in the municipality of Virú. Since the Peruvian government's embrace of neoliberalism in the early 1990s, large corporate agribusinesses have shaped the country's agricultural sector, largely to the detriment of subsistence and small family farmers. In the new constitution of 1993 with Law 26505, known as "Ley de Tierras" (land law), and Law 27360, "Ley de promoción del sector agrario" (law of agrarian sector promotion), the state approved policies that fuelled land concentration and large-scale corporate agriculture. This also led to increased use of migrant and seasonal labour, with high rotation of workers, temporary contracts, and low wages. In Virú migrants, mostly coming from Peru's poorer highlands, are forced into labour and living conditions that aggravate land pressure and marginalisation, further feeding the spiral of inequality (Araujo Raurau, 2020).

Sources: Baumeister (2020); Araujo Raurau (2020).

Besides being a push factor for migration, land inequality is also a consequence of migration. Particularly in informal settlements in their places of destination, migrants are often trapped in highly unequal labour and living conditions. Their entitlement to land and land rights is limited and they often risk further displacement. For host communities, migration may add to land pressures, with impacts on the land rights of women and other vulnerable groups within that community.

2.2.6 Land inequality, social exclusion, and intergenerational justice

Rural women and youth face multiple challenges linked to land inequality, including reduced access to land and employment prospects, exacerbated by climate change (IFAD, 2019; Kosec et al., 2018). This has further implications for social exclusion and disempowerment.

> *In particular, land inequality structurally reduces opportunities for younger rural generations, especially girls, to improve their lives in the long term.*

This negative spiral is reinforced as women and youth are systematically excluded from policy decisions, including in relation to land (Oxfam, 2016), overlapping with other forms of exclusion based on wealth, place of residence, race, or ethnicity.

Overcoming wider inequalities is impossible without addressing land inequality

The centrality of land inequality to many global problems is clear. Tackling this issue therefore has the potential to deliver significant positive outcomes for humanity and the planet.

> *Addressing land inequality will not only redress asset and wealth inequality, but will reduce rent-seeking by a minority, improve income equality, and enable more inclusive and sustainable development.*

This can strengthen democracies by establishing more broadly based decision-making among landed populations, with greater participation and transparency. The direct relationship of land inequality with environmental damage makes addressing it imperative for achieving environmental sustainability, improved global biodiversity, and spatial and social justice – all necessary to combat climate change and health crises. All of the above are stepping-stones towards more resilient, stable, and sustainable societies, where no one is left behind.

As Merlet (2020, citing CTFD, 2020) writes: “It is because small producers, peasants or indigenous peoples produce more net value per unit area than large companies, because they preserve biodiversity, soils, forests (on condition that they are not reduced to having to survive at all costs), and because their decisions respond to a logic of heritage and not to a logic of maximizing short-term profits, it is in everyone’s interest not to allow an explosion of land inequalities.”

Photo: ©ILC/Jason Taylor

"One does not need to buy land in order to have control over it. [...] Less visible forms of control over land create inequality in land holding itself, as well as inequality in the power over land and the appropriation of value from the land and activities on it."

Wegerif and Anseeuw, 2020:2

3 THE (SHOCKING) STATE OF LAND INEQUALITY IN THE WORLD

Measuring land inequality is not easy. The literature on land distribution has long relied on estimates of Gini coefficients for land distribution, using agricultural censuses that provide data on the number of land holdings and the total area of holdings by size. These estimates face various challenges – some are related to the data used, others to the methodology applied (*Box 8*). Despite these challenges, the use of the Gini coefficient, as traditionally presented in the literature, remains justified as it is the longest-used methodology, based on census data which are available in most countries at a particular time, allowing for a long-term perspective of land inequality across countries. These data are now complemented by innovative methodologies developed in the framework of this project, aiming at better grasping the multi-dimensional nature of land inequality (*Box 8*).

Box 8: Challenges with the traditional use of the Gini coefficient to measure land inequality - towards new methodologies

Challenges include:

- Land distribution calculated using agricultural census data captures the distribution of the size of farms rather than land ownership. Agricultural censuses do not necessarily account for multiple land holdings per owner and fail to capture the full extent of land concentration.
- The present Gini coefficient is generally uni-dimensional, not taking into consideration the multi-dimensional complexities of land inequality.
- Other aspects related to land (quality of land, presence of assets, other resources such as water, proximity to infrastructure and markets, etc.) are not measured in agriculture censuses.
- Agricultural censuses generally do not distinguish between different forms of legal ownership, nor do they include corporate ownership or shareholding structures.
- Census data focus only on agricultural and landed households and do not account for landless households; thus they do not portray actual levels of inequality.
- The Gini coefficient is a synthetic measure of inequality that summarises the entire distribution into a single number, and it is thus less informative about where the important changes in distribution take place.
- The coverage, methodologies, and thresholds for agricultural censuses are not uniform between countries or over time, especially in developing countries; despite efforts to bring uniformity, this reduces their comparability.

Towards new measures of land inequality:

In response to these challenges, new methodologies for measuring land inequality were developed as part of this Land Inequality Initiative. Vargas and Luiselli (2020) endeavour to integrate the multi-dimensional nature of land inequality by combining – besides the standard quantitative size of land plots indicator – tenure, quality of land, endowment, assets, and other indicators. To do this, they suggest using various additional data sources.

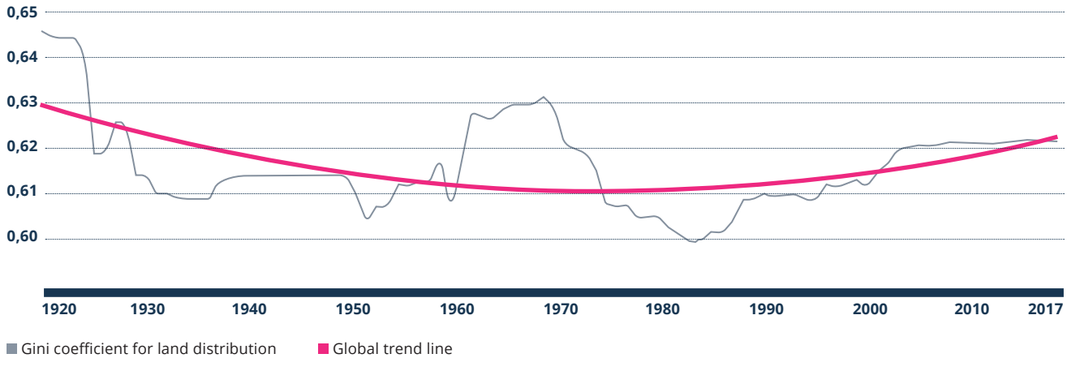
A second approach by Bauluz et al. (2020), based on survey data, assesses land inequality based on land owned by a household (beyond distribution of the size of farms, factoring in multiple ownership of plots) and land values (as a criterion of quality of land), and also accounts for the landless. The authors implemented this methodology using a sample of countries: India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, China, Vietnam, Ecuador, Guatemala, Brazil, Mexico, Peru, Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, The Gambia, Malawi, Niger, Nigeria, and Tanzania. The selection of countries was a result of data availability and, although some of the most populous countries were covered in this analysis, more countries need to be covered in future research to obtain a more complete picture. Nevertheless, the results represent an important attempt at innovating assessments of and deepening perspectives on land inequality.

Sources: Vargas and Luiselli (2020); Bauluz et al. (2020).

Land inequality is increasing again

Available data, despite their limitations, do permit us to look back at land inequality trends over the past 100 years.

Figure 5: Land inequality over time (1910–2017), measured by the Gini coefficient



Source: The authors, based on various data sources.

Methodological note: Calculation of the Gini coefficient for land, capturing the distribution of the size of land holding (farm or plots), in private ownership. Data are gathered from all sources available, implementing the same Gini coefficient methodology.

This shows that land inequality steadily decreased from the early twentieth century, up until the 1980s. At that point, the trend reversed, and land inequality has since been increasing steadily.

From a Gini coefficient of 0.64 in the early years of the century, land inequality decreased to 0.60 in 1982, but had increased again to 0.62 by 2017 (*Figure 5*).

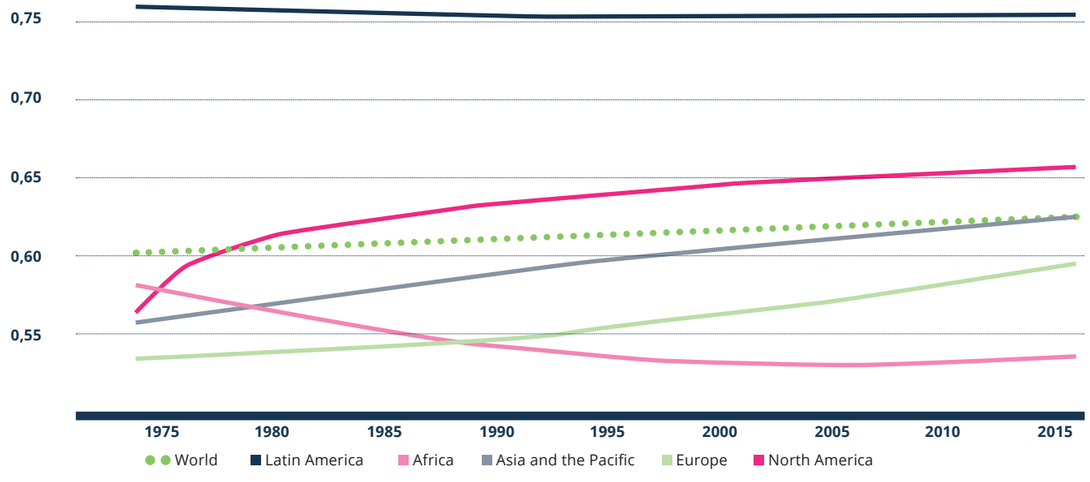
The largest 1% of farms operate 70% of farmland, supplying corporate food systems.

Today, it is estimated that there are approximately 608 million farms in the world. About 90% are family farms, which include all sizes of farm from the smallest to some of the largest, occupying 70–80% of all farmland.

About 84% of farms are smaller than two hectares, but these operate only about 12% of farmland, with little if any opportunity to be part of corporate supply chains.

Already, according to Lowder et al. (2019: v), "[t]he largest 1 percent of farms in the world operate more than 70 percent of the world's farmland"; these farms form the core of production for the corporate food system. Unless there is substantial policy intervention, given the trends in the agriculture and food systems, land consolidation will inevitably increase further.

Figure 6: Land inequality trend lines since 1975, measured by the Gini coefficient



Source: The authors, based on various data sources.

Methodological note: Same Gini methodology and data sources as in *Figure 5*, from 1975 onwards. Trend lines are polynomial.

Although land inequality patterns vary significantly from region to region, a consistent pattern of land consolidation emerges throughout (*Figure 6*). After 1980, in all regions, land concentration has either been increasing significantly (North America, Europe, Asia and the Pacific) or a decreasing trend is being reversed (Africa and Latin America).

A clear trend in most low-income countries is an increasing number of farms, combined with smaller and smaller farm sizes. Across the world, and especially in higher-income countries, large farms are getting bigger.

The missing middle

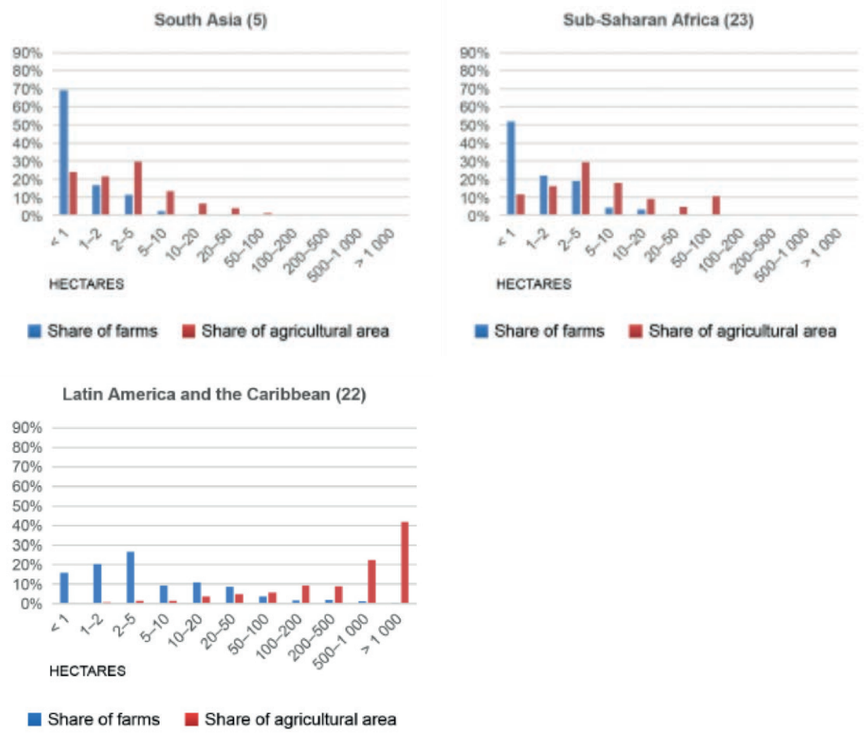
North America has seen a drastic increase in land and agricultural concentration. US data show a decline from 3.7 million farms to 2.1 million between 1960 and 1990, accompanied by a steady rise in average farm sizes, from 122.6 hectares to 187 hectares over the same period. From 1990 to 2010 the number of farms and average farm sizes remained fairly stable, at 2.1 million farms with an average size of around 175 hectares (Lowder et al., 2019). While the total number of farms and their average size have stabilised, the number of farms larger than 500 hectares has risen from 1971 onwards, while the total number of the smallest farms, including those of less than five hectares, has also increased. Medium-size farms ranging from 50 to 500 hectares have significantly decreased in number. This is an increasingly polarised and unequal land distribution. Hendrickson et al. (2017: 15) argue that "the 'agriculture of the middle' is declining and perhaps facing extinction".

What the figures on farm size do not reveal, however, are the even more substantial increases in the concentration of large-scale production on a shrinking number of farms. Almost 1 million farms (980,000) in the USA have less than $5,000 in sales per annum, while the largest 7% of farms account for 80% of production value (MacDonald, 2016). This leaves a situation where some 1.3 million, or 60%, of the farms in the USA produce only 6.6% of the total production value (Gollin, 2019). These include farms of below five hectares, many of which are known as "retirement farms" or "off-farm occupation farms", with owners who do not depend on agricultural production for their livelihoods.

A very similar trend is seen in the European Union (EU). The average farm size in the EU has almost doubled since the 1960s, from 12 hectares to 21 hectares by 2010. More significantly, the number of farms across the region that are larger than 100 hectares has increased steadily from 2005 to 2013 (Lowder et al., 2019), and fewer than 3% of farms now account for more than half of the farmed land (Gollin, 2019). The Gini coefficient for the EU, which was continuously decreasing from the beginning of the twentieth century, has increased since 1980 by almost 10%, to reach an average of 0.58.

The vast majority of the smallest farms globally are in Africa and Asia, where they are essential to the livelihoods of a large proportion of the population. *Figure 7* shows the distribution of farms and land in sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, and Latin America and the Caribbean. Most farms are smaller than two hectares, and there is a significant amount of land in farms of 2–10 hectares, while a very small proportion of land appears to be part of much larger farms.

Figure 7: Distribution of land by size class in sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, and Latin America and the Caribbean



Sources: Lowder et al. (2019) for Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia; Lowder et al. (2016) for Latin America and the Caribbean.

Figure 7 shows that these low, and in Africa's case even decreasing, levels of inequality have given way to new trends since the 1980s. Africa's Gini coefficient for land has stabilised at 0.54, resulting from a combination of fragmentation due to population increase at the lower levels with an increasing interest in farmland by domestic elites and national and international corporate actors. Asia, on the other hand, has seen its Gini coefficient rise significantly, from 0.56 in 1980 to 0.62 at present, an increase of 11%. In this case, it is related to consolidation within the framework of the Asian Green Revolution, the significant number of large-scale land acquisitions for agriculture and other sectors (mining, infrastructure, tourism), and a growing landless population (Djurfeldt, 2005).

Indeed, hidden behind shrinking average farm sizes in most low-income countries is the increasing number of mega-farms, each taking up thousands, even tens of thousands, of hectares (Box 9).

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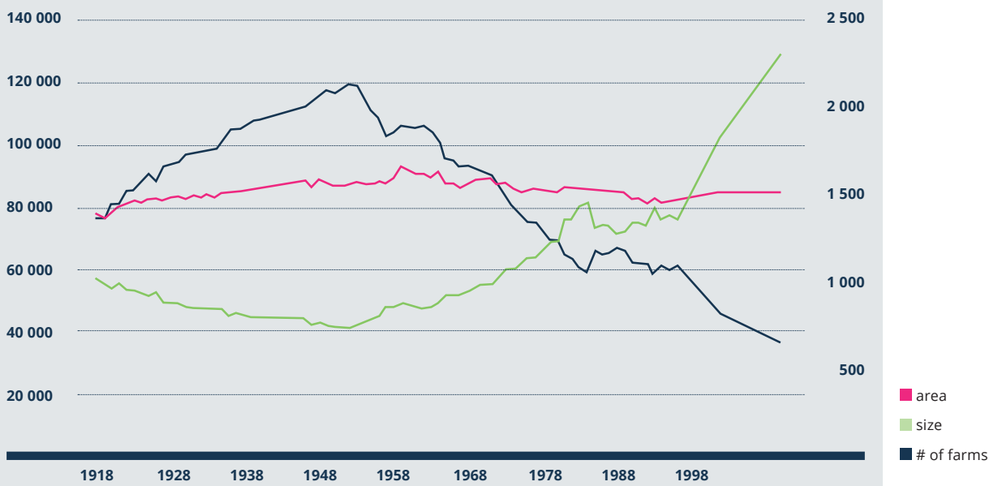
In Tanzania, for example, the 108 large-scale farm investments that have recently been implemented control more land than the smallest two million farm entities combined (Wegerif and Guereña, 2020).

Box 9: Large-scale land acquisitions, commercial pressures on land, and increasing inequalities

The rush for land since 2000 is a well observed trend, which has primarily affected agrarian economies in Africa and Asia. Lands that in the early 2000s were of marginal investment interest were suddenly sought out, mainly by international investors, with demand peaking in 2010. By 2018, the Land Matrix had identified around 1,000 large-scale agricultural land deals covering 26.7 million hectares of land around the globe (Land Matrix, 2018). Africa accounts for 42% of these deals and about 10 million hectares of land, an area the size of Iceland. Even though the global land rush has slowed, new acquisitions are still being recorded, contributing to growing pressures on rural people and their land.

Figure 8: Evolution of farming units and farming area in South Africa (1918–2010)



Source: Liebenberg (2013).

Numerous countries in Latin America and some other (often settler) countries, such as South Africa, where the unequal distribution of land formed the backbone of wealth and asset inequality during colonial times, are still characterised by extreme land inequalities. Agrarian reforms aimed at redistributing land have largely failed to rebalance inequalities (Frankema, 2009). On the contrary, the economic model in these countries based on extractivism and agricultural exports, combined with liberal market economies, is leading to significant agricultural land expansion and land concentration (*Box 10*).

Box 10: The 1% - extreme land concentration in Latin America and South Africa

An Oxfam analysis of 15 Latin American countries shows that the largest 1% of farms hold more than half of all agricultural land (Oxfam, 2016). In other words, this 1% of farms occupy more land than the remaining 99%. On average, the size of each of these large farms is over 2,000 hectares (equivalent to 4,000 soccer fields), although in the countries of the Southern Cone (Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay) they are much larger. For example, in Argentina the average size of farms in the largest 1% is over 22,000 hectares. The most extreme case is Colombia, where farms of more than 500 hectares – which account for only 0.4% of all farms by number – occupy 67.6% of productive land (Oxfam, 2016).

Similar trends can be found in South Africa, where years of colonial and apartheid land dispossession, combined with mainly white investment in large-scale farms, has created a skewed land and agricultural sector dominated by a small number of capital-intensive, white-owned commercial farms. Liberalisation of the agricultural sector and its integration into global markets at the end of the apartheid era only led to increasing concentration of land and control of production. While in 1994 at the end of apartheid South Africa counted about 60,000 commercial farmers, today only 34,000 remain – illustrating, despite agrarian reforms, the significant concentration trends ongoing in the country (Cochet et al., 2015). It is estimated that only around 20% of commercial farms account for 80% of agricultural production by value. Meanwhile between 2 and 2.5 million smallholders live in rural areas and produce crops largely for home consumption and occasional sales (Cousins, 2015). They contribute only a fraction of the value of crops marketed, with 98% of them being unable to support themselves from agriculture alone. Taking into consideration all farmers in South Africa (commercial and non-commercial), it is estimated that only 0.28% of farms produce around 80% of the value of agricultural production. This is taking place in Africa's most industrialised and urbanised country, which is still not able to provide non-farm jobs for its adult population, leaving 30.1% of them unemployed (StatsSA, 2020).

Sources: Oxfam (2016); Wegerif and Anseeuw (2020).

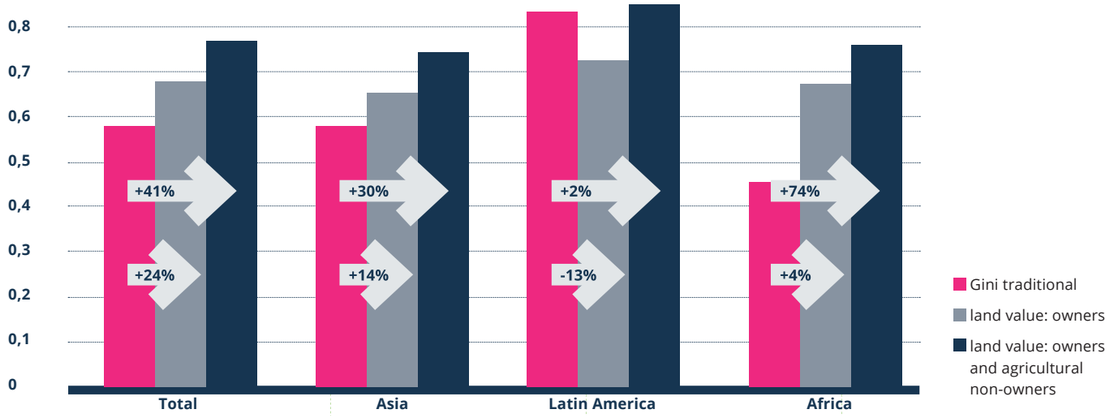
The land sector is even more concentrated than we think

By assessing land inequality using survey data and factoring in multiple ownership of plots, land values, and the landless, rather than the single measure used to produce the traditional Gini coefficient for land, it becomes clear that land inequality has been significantly underestimated to date.

> *Overall, research carried out for this project has found that the wealthiest 10% of rural populations across the sampled countries capture 60% of agricultural land value, while the poorest 50% of rural populations, who are generally more dependent on agriculture, capture only 3% of land value (Bauluz et al., 2020).*

Compared with the traditional census data and Gini coefficient generally used, this is an increase in inequality of 41% if agricultural land value and landlessness are considered, 24% if only value is considered.

Figure 9: Differences in levels of inequality when the traditional Gini coefficient is compared with inequality measures considering land values and the landless population



Source: Authors' calculations, based on data from Bauluz et al. (2020).

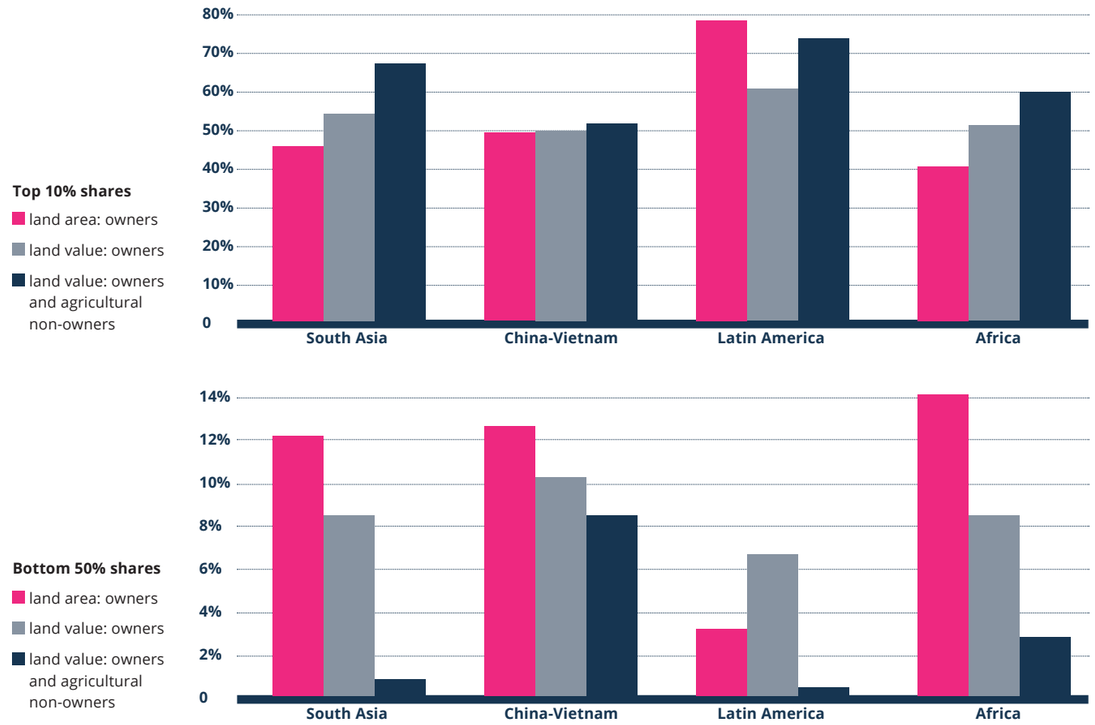
Methodological notes:

1) The blue bar represents the Gini coefficient for land as traditionally calculated, based on census data (using the latest data available), as explained in the previous section; the red bar represents land inequality, based on the methodology developed by Bauluz et al. (2020), based on survey data focusing on land owned by a household (factoring in multiple ownership of plots) and on land values (as a criterion of quality of land); the green bar is similar to the red one but also includes the landless population.

2) Full datasets (i.e. census data; value data and data on landlessness based on survey data) were only available for India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, China, Vietnam, Ecuador, Guatemala, Ethiopia, Malawi, Niger, and Tanzania. For this reason, the following comparisons are based only on this reduced sample of countries.

These new estimates provide important new insights into international patterns of land inequality. Here, as well, regional differences are important. Although Latin America remains the most unequal region globally, land inequalities in Asia (+30%) and Africa (+74%) increase by proportionally more – leading to Gini coefficients of above 0.70 in all regions. According to these benchmark metrics of agricultural land inequality (considering land value inequality and including the landless population), South Asia and Latin America exhibit the highest levels of inequality, with the top 10% of landowners capturing up to 75% of agricultural land and the bottom 50% owning less than 2%. The African countries display land ownership patterns that are relatively less unequal, while "Communist" Asia (China and Vietnam) is the world region with the lowest levels of inequality (*Figures 10a* and *10b*).

Figures 10a (upper panel) and 10b (lower panel): The top 10% and the bottom 50% shares of land area and land value among the land owning class, and including the landless population



Source: Bauluz et al. (2020).

LAND INEQUALITIES UNEVEN GROUND: LAND INEQUALITY AT THE HEART OF UNEQUAL SOCIETIES

Asian countries that appeared to be moderately equal using traditional measures (such as India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan) have among the highest levels of inequality when land values and the landless population are included.

China and Vietnam, by contrast, display higher levels of land inequality among landowners than South Asia and Africa, but land concentration is only slightly higher when land values and landless households are considered. According to the benchmark inequality indicator created by Bauluz et al. (2020), China and Vietnam appear to be the least unequal countries in our sample.

Latin America still displays the most unequal distribution of agricultural land. However, unlike the other world regions, land inequality among landowners is substantially lower in value than in area, which is probably related to substantially less productive large holdings compared with medium- to low-sized holdings (Bauluz et al., 2020). This factor significantly reduces the difference between Latin America and other continents.

Finally, African countries occupy an intermediate position. Africa has the lowest levels of land area inequality among landowners, but this rises significantly when land values and the landless population are included.

These figures indicating increasing land inequality are worrying, but they are almost certainly still an understatement of the true level of inequality, as household surveys do not pick up company-owned farms. A look at the operations of corporate entities and investment funds reveals a number that are buying and controlling large amounts of land across different countries. This is a form of concentration of ownership that is currently completely missed by all surveys, and is very hard to quantify as not all investment funds are transparent about their investments.

Hidden forces in land inequality - control over land and production is driving up even more concentration in the land sector

Less visible forms of control over land create inequality in land holding itself, as well as inequality in the power over land and the appropriation of value from the land and activities on it.

First of all, a person or entity does not need to buy land in order to have control over it. For example, contract farming has been recognised as a potential route to accumulation, with the incorporation into (global) supply chains creating new dependencies and ending up perpetuating extractive models, aggravating patterns of inequality related to land (Chamberlain and Anseeuw, 2018; Sulle, 2017; Oya, 2012). Second, there is increasing corporate concentration of ownership and control throughout the agri-food sector, which influences the way that land is used to benefit those corporate entities and their investors. Third, the growing role of financial markets and actors that treat land as an asset class can significantly change the way that land is controlled and used (Wegerif and Anseeuw, 2020).

In the agri-food sector, corporate organisation is linked to industrial modes of primary production, which seek economies and other advantages of scale. This has been closely observed for several decades in the USA, with the rapid transformation of farming towards fewer large-scale industrial-style producers that are linked, through contracts or vertical integration, with processers who are required to meet uniform standards (Lang and Heasman, 2004; Martin, 2001). In this context, levels of consolidation of ownership and control have reached further and accelerated more rapidly, through a combination of two processes: 1) concentration, i.e. the exercise of horizontal ownership and control of other companies that would otherwise be competitors in the industry (a broadening); and 2) vertical integration, or just integration, which is exercised by a company taking ownership or control of the firms it buys from or sells to (a deepening).

With these processes, as Martin (2001: 13) observes, "farming is rapidly being transformed from a rural lifestyle to agribusiness with a supply chain mentality. The application of modern business principles and manufacturing approaches to agricultural production systems is commonly referred to as the industrialization of agriculture." These changes in agricultural production and land use go hand in hand with far-reaching integration to assure efficiency and effectiveness as well as control over value and supply chains.

The control over value chains gives these actors significant control over land, as well as over the distribution of the value of what is produced on the land, which in turn contributes indirectly to land inequality.

The potential control over land and food systems at global and local levels by certain corporations and investors goes far beyond the levels of inequality detected by agricultural census data and household surveys. One example of this kind of integration and concentration in the agri-food business is the US-Brazilian investment firm 3G Capital. While the owners of 3G are hardly household names, 3G and its founding partners are major shareholders of vast global brands covering production right up to retail, including Burger King, the Kraft Heinz Company, AB InBev (the biggest beer corporation in the world), and Lojas Americanas in Brazil – a large retail group that has recently got into the grocery business.

This concentration of control is compounded by increased interest in agricultural land from the financial sector.

Parts of the world's farmland are now considered financial assets, with no known physical owner, subject to decision-making processes that may be external to the farm and the agricultural sector.

Agricultural production is not embedded in territory anymore but depends on financial processes and actors scattered all over the world, including the use of derivative values detached from their material base, which brings greater instability to agricultural markets and puts speculative pressures on real markets and product prices (Fairbairn, 2014).

What this all comes down to is that we do not always know who owns what land. Shareholding structures and other financial constructs are mushrooming in land (and do not have to be declared in any country in the world, to our knowledge, thus remaining totally invisible), and the opacity which often surrounds the finances and activities of investment funds (Daniel, 2012) makes it impossible to assess the full extent of their impact on land concentration and inequality.

Estimations vary substantially: Buxton et al. (2012) estimate that 190 private equity firms are investing in agriculture and farmland around the world, whereas HighQuest Partners (2010) speak of 54 funds/companies that are either actively investing in funds to acquire and manage farmland or had already announced plans to raise capital to invest in the sector. Preqin lists the top US university endowment funds (Harvard Endowment Fund, for example, composed of 13,000 individual funds, distributed US$1.9 billion in 2019), showing that 10–20% of their assets are allocated to natural resources and farmland (Preqin, 2017).

The largest asset manager by value under management is the US firm BlackRock. At the end of 2010 it had US$3.346 trillion under management, very close to the US$3.4 trillion that was the gross domestic product (GDP) for 2009 of Germany, one of the top five economies in the world (BlackRock, 2009).

By the end of 2019, the funds managed by BlackRock had more than doubled in size to an incredible US$7.43 trillion, close to twice Germany's GDP of US$4 trillion for that same year (BlackRock, 2019).

Some of this growth is coming from investments in the agri-food sector. BlackRock is now a major investor, as are some of the other largest asset management companies, in grocery retailing, with major holdings in supermarket groups including Walmart, Costco, and Target. BlackRock and other asset managers also have big investments in the largest seed companies, such as Syngenta, DuPont, Dow, Bayer, and Monsanto (ETC Group, 2019). Blackrock and Vanguard – the second biggest asset manager, with around US$5 trillion under management – are among the largest shareholders in Tyson Foods, one of the largest livestock breeders in the world (CNN, 2020; Shukla, 2019). BlackRock and Vanguard were also the two biggest shareholders in both Monsanto and Bayer, and played a key role in their merger (IPES-Food, 2017).

With complex corporate and financial structures, cross-shareholdings, and other inter-relations, clear lines of responsibility for land use and management are becoming harder to discern, just as they are becoming more important. It is also difficult to hold investors accountable for their economic, social, and environmental impacts when the primary investors are unknown or geographically and institutionally distant from the operations invested in. When corporate responsibility measures are applied (if at all), they often have a developmental or environmental aim, yet little is being done about the impacts that corporations and financial structures are having on growing land inequality and its consequences.

Photo: ©ILC/Michael Benanav

"To isolate [land] and form a market for it was perhaps the weirdest of all the undertakings of our ancestors [...]. The economic function is but one of many vital functions of land. [...] To subordinate the substance of society itself to the laws of the market [and] to allow the market mechanism to be the sole director would result in the demolition of society "

Polanyi, 1944

4 LAND INEQUALITY SOLUTIONS FOR RESILIENT, SUSTAINABLE, AND EQUITABLE SOCIETIES

Due to the distinct characteristics of land as a finite good, which cannot be grown or produced, and whose management has direct consequences for people and the environment, land is not a commodity like any other. Although land can be bought and sold, land markets are not likely to self-regulate. Without regulation, they almost inevitably become markets of exclusion and concentration where inequalities steadily increase. These unique characteristics mean that land markets developed independently of society cannot work in the common interest. Abolishing all forms of market and entrusting the management of land only to states and governments is not a solution either. For more resilient, sustainable, and equitable societies, we need to reflect on new ways to address contemporary patterns of land inequality and their drivers (*Box 11*).

Box 11: Principles for addressing land inequality effectively

- Any mechanism to reduce land inequality must be compatible with broad social interests, and be accepted by the majority of the population (Merlet, 2020).
- The construction of institutions and mechanisms responsible for guaranteeing land equality will only be possible with the engagement of all relevant stakeholders. Civil society organisations (CSOs) and local institutions will always have a determining role to play in changing the power relations necessary for the implementation of such mechanisms and institutions (Merlet, 2020; Nguiffo, 2020). Such changes take time.
- Land inequalities relate to different rights – from ownership to use and control. The focus of mechanisms should not only be on regulating ownership or rental markets. Regulation and oversight of control over land and shareholding mechanisms affecting land will also be necessary.
- Land inequality interventions should not exist in isolation. Land redistribution efforts, for example, will fail to create sustainable livelihoods, let alone prosperity, and are likely be reversed if control of land policies, markets, and other parts of the agri-food system remains in the hands of a few (Wegerif and Anseeuw, 2020).
- Context is key. To reduce land inequality in a sustainable manner and to optimise land use in order to serve broad social interests, policies and mechanisms must be tailored to each individual situation.

The policies and measures presented here are not exhaustive and do not claim to be "one size fits all" solutions. Instead, this chapter offers elements to build on and to be adapted to the political, social, cultural, economic, and ecological contexts of specific regions or countries which are in constant and accelerated transformation, particularly through the penetration of market relations and the corporatisation and financialisation of their economies and societies. In addition, beyond these proposed mechanisms and policies, counter-movements are growing, highlighting that there is space for different production and development models and paradigms.

Land redistribution and agrarian reform

While at specific moments in history redistributive agrarian reforms have played a decisive role, they require exceptional social and political conditions to succeed. For instance, they have been effective during revolutions: in Mexico in 1910, in Bolivia in 1953, and in Cuba in 1959. The same happened in China and Vietnam a few decades later. They have also been successful in the aftermath of wars and during a country's occupation. Examples include Japan, Taiwan, and Korea after World War II (Merlet, 2020; Montesdoeca Chulde and Ramos Bayas, 2020). On the other hand, Latin America is the continent where the most agrarian reforms have taken place over the last century; however, the region remains characterised by the highest rates of land concentration (Bauluz et al., 2020).

Agrarian reform is usually unsuccessful because policies and programmes have short-term, political aims and fail to address the many factors affecting land inequality, without any broad-based aspiration for radical change in agrarian structures. Nor do they consider the general socioeconomic situation of the intended beneficiaries, such as people's access to credit, support services, and infrastructure (***Box 12***).

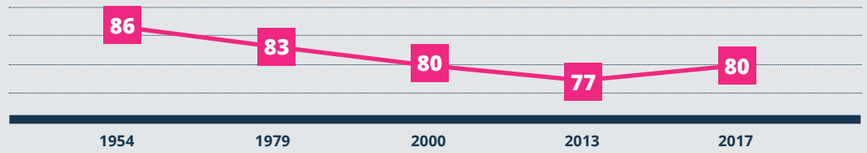
For agrarian reforms to be effective, they must be consistent with a country's economic and social policy and must include measures to prevent a return to land inequality over time (Merlet, 2020).

The space for agrarian reform and redistributive land policies has shrunk in most countries due to the global dominance of liberal economic policy and consequent limits on the role of states (Guereña and Wegerif, 2020; Scoones et al., 2018). However, in countries where economic and land inequalities are profound despite such reforms – such as South Africa, Brazil, and Paraguay – there has been a surge in land occupations, often triggering repressive reactions by the state. This suggests that redistributive land reforms should not be dismissed as an answer to land inequality but rather should be reconceived and relaunched, learning from the past while also adapting to contemporary circumstances (Merlet, 2013). Ongoing land inequality struggles also show that a range of complementary measures are needed to address land inequality.

Box 12: Agrarian reform and land redistribution in Ecuador - a case of success and failure

In Ecuador the agrarian reforms of the 1960s and 1970s, as well as the Plan Tierras of 2008 to promote food sovereignty and reduce rural poverty, saw land inequality decline by about 10%. However, the country's Gini coefficient for land ownership has climbed again in the past decade (*Figure 11*).

Figure 11: Evolution of the Gini land ownership index in Ecuador



While Plan Tierras brought benefits to some farmers, it did not significantly alter Ecuador's land tenure structure. A continuous focus on export agriculture resulted in increased land concentration, while onerous bureaucratic requirements meant that only 26,000 hectares were redistributed, compared with the 2 million hectares pledged. Further obstacles to implementation included miscalculations of land prices and high debts that small-scale farmers had to repay on acquired land. Furthermore, farmers did not receive adequate support to increase agricultural production, or for irrigation or access to markets and credit.

Source: Montesdoeca Chulde and Ramos Bayas (2020).

4.2 Land market regulation

Land market regulation refers to a wide range of mechanisms and instruments that govern land transfer and guide the rights of users, owners, and beneficiaries of land and related resources. Examples include price controls on purchase and rental markets, size controls (minimum and maximum), protection mechanisms for renters or owners, pre-emption rights or rights of first refusal, foreign land ownership regulations, and others. These can be applied to owners and renters as well as to users (see Merlet (2020) for further examples).

Entrusting land market regulation to states alone is not a solution.

To address land inequality, societies need to establish governance institutions with a public purpose, reflecting collective rights, and the ability to act with a certain degree of autonomy.

LAND INEQUALITIES UNEVEN GROUND: LAND INEQUALITY AT THE HEART OF UNEQUAL SOCIETIES

The market is not suppressed through these mechanisms but can be integrated into society and controlled by ad hoc institutions, including representatives of the inhabitants of the territory. Obviously, democratic and inclusive functioning of the governance institution is essential. Its power cannot be exercised by decree, and its legitimacy cannot be miraculously acquired straight away (Merlet, 2020). Examples include the SAFERs in France (*Box 13*) and the Landgesellschaften in Germany.

Box 13: SAFER - regulating land markets in France

In France, buying and selling farmland is done through a semi-regulated market. Control over the market is operated by SAFER (a national federation of societies for rural land development and rural settlement). Every French region has its local SAFER, which represents national and local authorities and land users. SAFERs were created in the 1960s to oversee the market in rural land and to promote the development of financially sustainable farms. Their mission has evolved over time to include environmental protection and local development, as well as ensuring transparency in the rural property market. Local SAFERs monitor farmland transactions and intervene when needed to make the sale best suited to the objectives of the law and territorial priorities. A SAFER can buy the land and sell it to the person/entity that best suits public objectives (which may not be the highest bidder). SAFERs intervene only when it is deemed necessary: ***in 2018, they stepped in and pre-empted sales 1,380 times, fewer than 1% of all sales notified to them.*** Designed in coherence with other regulatory mechanisms, SAFERs have succeeded in limiting land consolidation and price inflation for farmland. However, they now need to adapt to changes in the agricultural sector, particularly the increased presence of financial interests and the use of financial instruments to own and control farmland.

In a land sector that is becoming more and more corporatised and financialised, a model like the French SAFERs could be an effective way to address concentration of land through shareholding. As Merlet (2020) suggests, new local commissions could be made responsible for monitoring all forms of transfer of rights to use land, whether through purchase, rental, or shareholding.

Land taxes

Land taxes have the potential to be a progressive instrument in addressing land inequality. They exist in a number of forms and can be recurrent (when levied on a regular basis on the use or ownership of land) or non-recurrent (when levied on certain one-off transactions). Non-recurrent taxes include property transfer taxes, normally applied to the sale or purchase of land, gifts, and inheritance, and taxes on capital gains. Land taxes are normally calculated based on land value. They can target land only or include improvements such as infrastructure or buildings. They can also factor in any increase in value due to public investment and access to services (Itriago, 2020).

Taxes on land can have impacts on land inequality directly by discouraging accumulation, reducing speculation, and constraining the intergenerational transmission of inequality, while promoting more effective, sustainable, and environmentally viable land use (Itriago, 2020; Alvaredo et al., 2018; Deininger, 2003). They also have indirect impacts by providing a predictable source of revenue, often to local governments, that can be used for investment in infrastructure and public services (Collier et al., 2018; De Cesare and Lazo, 2008). In addition, land taxes can promote transparency of ownership and accountability for contributions and use of funds (De Cesare, 2012; Deininger 2005).

Compared with other land-related redistributive interventions, land taxes can be applied progressively and have a less disruptive impact, as they normally do not generate distortions affecting investments or the efficient use of production factors (Itriago, 2020; Youngman, 2017; Childress et al., 2009).

However, many of the world's most unequal countries have zero or very low land taxes (Alvaredo et al., 2018). Developing countries, in particular, underuse land taxes as a source of revenue or as part of a broader agenda for socially and environmentally sustainable growth. Obstacles to implementing land taxes may be political or be due to administrative inefficiencies. Legal and technical constraints include incomplete land registration systems that are not capable of tracking changes in the market value of land. The lack or scarcity of information on land transactions and changes in value often makes estimating tax rates challenging, and this can undermine the inequality-reducing effect of land taxation. Additionally, decentralisation is often still limited, with sub-national levels of government registering a low tax collection and management capacity, due to policy and institutional constraints.

To make land taxes an effective pro-equity policy instrument, investments to improve coordination between the different levels of governance are often necessary (Itriago, 2020). Taxation is also becoming more difficult in a corporatised and globalised world as shareholdings and transfers are generally not taxed, which makes newer types of land ownership and control invisible for taxation purposes. Also, many of the companies investing in large-scale land acquisitions and the extractive sector are registered in tax havens (Borras Jr et al., 2014), making it essential to address tax evasion and avoidance with greater transparency and coordinated international efforts (Guereña and Wegerif, 2019).

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Corporate and investor accountability

Mechanisms that are used to hold companies to account for their actions and investments exist at different levels, from international to national, sectoral, or covering more specific segments of agricultural value chains (see Nguiffo, 2020, for a detailed list and description of standards, principles, and guidelines). However, they are generally voluntary, with weak oversight.

A recent assessment of large-scale international land investments in the agricultural sector by G20 countries confirms that accountability and transparency on land issues are very low (Flaschsbarth et al., 2020). The study found that the company operating the land in question was publicly known in fewer than 20% of land deals. In only 15% of G20 investments was the exact location of the land communicated, and in fewer than 10% of purchases did investors publish the purchase price or leasing fee. It is striking that for 90% of the deals there was no information on consultation with communities. This lack of transparency around land investments is consistent with the increase in the use of complex corporate structures, cross-shareholdings, and financial market interests in land, as described in ***Chapter 3***.

Transparent reporting by investors and accountability are unlikely to happen without enforcement. While numerous aspirations are set out in the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, the OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises, or the Principles for Responsible Investment in Agriculture and Food Systems of the Committee on World Food Security (CFS), among others, such mechanisms lack impact.

Little will change without compulsory compliance and reporting requirements and national governments (especially of investor countries) holding companies registered in their jurisdictions to account.

Vitally important is to require respect for free, prior, and informed consent (FPIC) as a right recognised under international law for indigenous peoples, giving communities the choice to give or withhold consent to a project planned on their land (Oxfam, 2019).

In addition, public entities need to be fully transparent. Public support, including development finance for investments or projects, should be contingent on the release of all relevant information.

It should be mandatory for companies and investors to publicise their shareholdings in other companies and initiatives owning, accessing, and controlling land and land-related activities. At the same time, countries should restructure their land registries to include information regarding institutional ownership and control of land through sophisticated financial instruments, including listed and unlisted funds.

Ultimately, improving transparency and accountability around land investments will not succeed without legal reform at host country level.

There is a need for stronger national laws and policy frameworks which compel investors to follow the highest due diligence standards and human rights and environmental protection standards. It is not acceptable that legal frameworks at country level are less stringent than international ones, nor that corporate actors often have more secure tenure rights than small-scale farmers, pastoralists, hunter-gatherers, and local communities. Corporate rights are protected by international treaties that protect foreign investment and give businesses direct access to international redress (Cotula, 2020). Although they lack enforcement powers, the current international mechanisms are useful indications for legislative reform and offer avenues for advocacy to donors, communities, and CSOs. There is also a need to support more independent and innovative monitoring of companies and investors operating in agriculture and land-related activities, as well as of shareholding and control of production. Investments should be made in data collection, capacity building, and training, including for civil society, as well as mechanisms for redress.

Responding to horizontal land inequality: collective and women's land rights

Collective land rights and tenure refers to systems in which a group holds secure rights to own, manage, and/or use land and natural resources autonomously, according to customary or established rules and norms. Secure collective rights enable such groups to better resist external pressures and increase their potential to use land to meet their social and ecological needs (Guereña and Wegerif, 2019). As such, collective land rights contribute to reducing inequality, both within communities and between communities and external actors, including surrounding populations (Bautista Durán and Bazoberry Chali, 2020).

Although it will not reverse land inequality, protecting collective land rights assures the well-being, livelihoods, and the ability to retain land of at least 2.5 billion people worldwide, mostly indigenous peoples and local communities.

It also reinforces the stewardship role that these populations and territories play with regard to climate change, global biodiversity management, bio-cultural conservation, and justice, including territorial and gender justice.

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Collective governance can range from legally recognised and documented community land holdings through to non-statutory and undocumented rights (*Box 14*). In all cases, FPIC is a crucial principle. Not only does it give communities a choice to consent or to withhold consent, it also enables them to negotiate the conditions under which the use of their land will be designed, implemented, monitored, and evaluated. This is also embedded within the fundamental right to self-determination of all peoples. Nevertheless, this principle is not always respected, particularly in relation to large-scale developments or extractive projects (Bautista Durán and Bazoberry Chali, 2020).

Box 14: The benefits and challenges of acquiring and exercising collective rights in the Philippines

In the Philippines, after the People Power Revolution of 1986, indigenous peoples were offered the opportunity to reclaim ancestral domains. MILALITTRA, an organisation of the indigenous Talaandig tribe in the province of Bukidnon in Mindanao, was one of the first indigenous peoples' organisations in that region to claim formal recognition of tenure rights for the community and for individual households.

With the Philippines' enactment of the Indigenous Peoples Rights Act, MILALITTRA was awarded a Certificate of Ancestral Domain Title in 2003, which empowered the community to govern their own land. With this recognition, the community was able to exercise rights over the land, prevent intrusion by illegal occupants and investors, regulate the felling of trees in the forests, and settle disputes among community members. The community could also collaborate with other stakeholders and institutional partners.

However, competing interests from other sectors have threatened to undermine the community's enjoyment of its hard-won collective rights. With rapid economic growth in the Philippines and the limited availability of land, ancestral domains have become attractive to business interests for the establishment of special economic zones, agricultural investments, mining, and tourism. Increasing commercial pressure has seen many community members sell off land without the consent of tribal leaders or the community.

Source: Ravanera et al. (2020).

Securing women's land rights is essential to achieving gender justice and global goals on gender equality, but this is challenging, including for communally held land. In general terms, gender equality in land rights only exists when 1) women and men can acquire rights that are equally secure; 2) women and men can equally enjoy and exercise their land rights; and 3) women's and men's land rights are equally protected when they are threatened (Scalise, 2020).

In negotiations with other parties over communally held land, recognition of women's land and governance rights requires specific attention, including in processes seeking their FPIC. Rural women's inheritance rights are a critical component of their economic security, especially upon the death of a spouse, partner, or parent.

Without legal protections, women are extremely vulnerable to property grabbing and other forms of domestic violence, including physical abuse, and to forced marriage upon the death of a husband or domestic partner – and thus to land inequalities and other injustices (Lakidi Achan, 2020).

Achieving gender equality in land rights involves a complex combination of actions, including reform laws favouring women's and men's equal opportunities to acquire rights, as well as encouraging adaptation of social norms, attitudes, and behaviours. Supporting women's self-directed decision-making and optimal use and stewardship of land is also needed so that they have equal opportunities to generate value from land (*Box 15*). If women are to benefit from measures related to land rights, it is also important to specifically address discriminatory aspects affecting women in other areas of the agri-food system, such as access to markets, credit, and support services.

Box 15: Women in Communal Land Associations in Uganda

In Uganda, the government has promoted the formation of Communal Land Associations (CLAs) as a response to securing community land tenure. The formation of the CLAs has included community sensitisation on gender issues and the inclusion of women in land governance. This has triggered a profound change in attitudes towards women's land ownership among both women and men. Women can now formally own communal land. Additionally, allocating a quota of seats on communal land management committees to women has increased their voice and capacity to influence decision-making, significantly narrowing the gender gap on land rights at community and household levels.

Source: Lakidi Achan (2020).

Through numerous international commitments (International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention No 169, CEDAW, the VGGTs, the SDGs), the implementation of land reform programmes, and the development of new types of legal and technical instruments, governments and organisations around the world are stepping up commitments, funding, and resources for securing collective tenure and women's land rights. These commitments and resources must be fostered, strengthened, and expanded, for example through the Beijing+25 Action Coalitions and processes. But these advances alone, while promising, remain insufficient to address the global challenges that women face. Weak implementation of existing national and international commitments is jeopardising the progress made. Without increased attention and effort, horizontal land inequalities will persist.

Counter-movements and alternatives: from inclusive food chains and collective action to agroecology

To respond effectively to land inequality, it is essential to interrogate and challenge support for elite- and corporate-driven growth, commodification of land and natural resources, and the global push for greater productivity and ever greater returns on investment in the agri-food sector. The mechanisms discussed in this chapter can potentially halt and reverse land inequality, but will be difficult and time-consuming to implement. Alternative strategies are therefore required that can support democratised and more equitable agri-food systems.

Box 16: Tan Dat Cooperative - collective action for inclusive food chains in Vietnam

Tan Dat Cooperative in Trung Ngai – one of the poorest communes in Vietnam's Mekong Delta – was initiated in September 2017. In this area, families owned on average less than one hectare of land, which was traditionally used for rice production. After three major land reforms and a process of land consolidation, the land was fragmented and productivity limited, aggravated by climate change, diseases, and land degradation. Fluctuating market prices also reduced farmers' ability to sustain themselves.

To join Tan Dat Cooperative, member families contributed capital either in cash or by giving easement over their land. Specialised work teams were formed, composed as far as possible of cooperative members themselves, to take care of rice production, input supply, and marketing. Profits from the cooperative's business operations were shared among members, minus a contribution to its development fund.

Since 2017, all members have enjoyed tangible and economic benefits, the land's value has increased, and they are also applying principles of agroecology. Tan Dat has obtained organic certification to European standards for 60 hectares of rice, building a strong reputation and a growing customer base.

Source: Oberlack et al. (2020).

Such strategies have been emerging, sometimes at the initiative of for-profit businesses as well as social entrepreneurs or communities of agricultural producers and food consumers, endeavouring to make current production models and value chains more inclusive. Inclusive food chains, for example, are fostering fair participation of smallholder producers, workers, and low-income communities in modern agri-food value chains (Oberlack et al., 2020). Collective action strategies are another model, based on shared values and interests, which have proven to be key for enforcing transformation (Ostrom, 1990). The degree of inclusiveness of businesses, markets, and value chains varies depending on the distribution of voice and representation, ownership, and benefits among the different stakeholders involved (Vermeulen and Cotula, 2010; Chamberlain and Anseeuw, 2018).

Although incorporation into global supply chains can create new dependencies and can end up perpetuating extractive models, aggravating patterns of inequality related to land, Oberlack et al. (2020) underscore that, when carefully and responsibly planned and adopted, such strategies can contribute to reshaping beneficial ownership and making market access more advantageous for low-income smallholders and communities (*Box 16*).

As well as changes driven by industry, there are growing counter-movements and public policies to support more equitable, sustainable, and democratic food systems. These include improvements in public market spaces, protection of national agricultural produce and food markets from international commodity market pressures, public investment in research and development for improved ecologically sound inputs, such as seed and livestock genetic stock, public investment in small-scale and appropriate storage and processing technology, and support for farmer-to-farmer learning and sharing of agroecological farming practices. These movements involve the promotion of farmers who are secure on their land and are able to get reasonable returns from employing agroecological, or at least low-external-input, production practices, linked with local markets. The territorial approaches they embrace allow for more inclusive and democratic processes. These kinds of strategy are supported by the CFS, the Milan Urban Food Policy Pact, which has been adopted by 120 cities, and the New Urban Agenda adopted at the UN General Assembly in 2016 (UN General Assembly, 2017; CFS, 2016).

> *Over the past few decades there has been a strong turn, especially in richer countries, towards alternative food networks and a non-corporate response to the challenge of feeding a growing and increasingly urban population.*

This often involves short supply chains and local markets, as well as food policy initiatives that attempt to build more socially and ecologically sustainable alternative food systems (Pimbert, 2015; Nasr and Komisar, 2012; Wiskerke and Viljeon, 2012). Farmers also develop niche markets that draw on local and regional qualities, and are creating new opportunities for rural development (Schneider et al., 2015; van der Ploeg et al., 2012).

Agroecological movements have also grown significantly and offer a different farmer- and land-focused way of organising production and food systems. They are building social movements, rooted in farmers' organisations, defending the land rights of independent family farmers, and pushing for change, as well as implementing different practices on the land (HLPE, 2019; La Via Campesina, 2018; Loconto et al., 2018). The Slow Food movement, which has members in over 160 countries globally, articulates and organises around a vision for food that is not about industrial production and corporate profits but instead sees food as linked to culture, politics, and the environment. It aims to preserve food culture and "ensure everyone has access to good, clean and fair food" (Slow Food, 2020).

These alternatives and movements contribute to the capacity of the global food system to support a growing world population while preserving healthy ecosystems. They build greater autonomy from corporate systems and increase the room for manoeuvre of food chain actors in reducing their dependency (van der Ploeg, 2008).

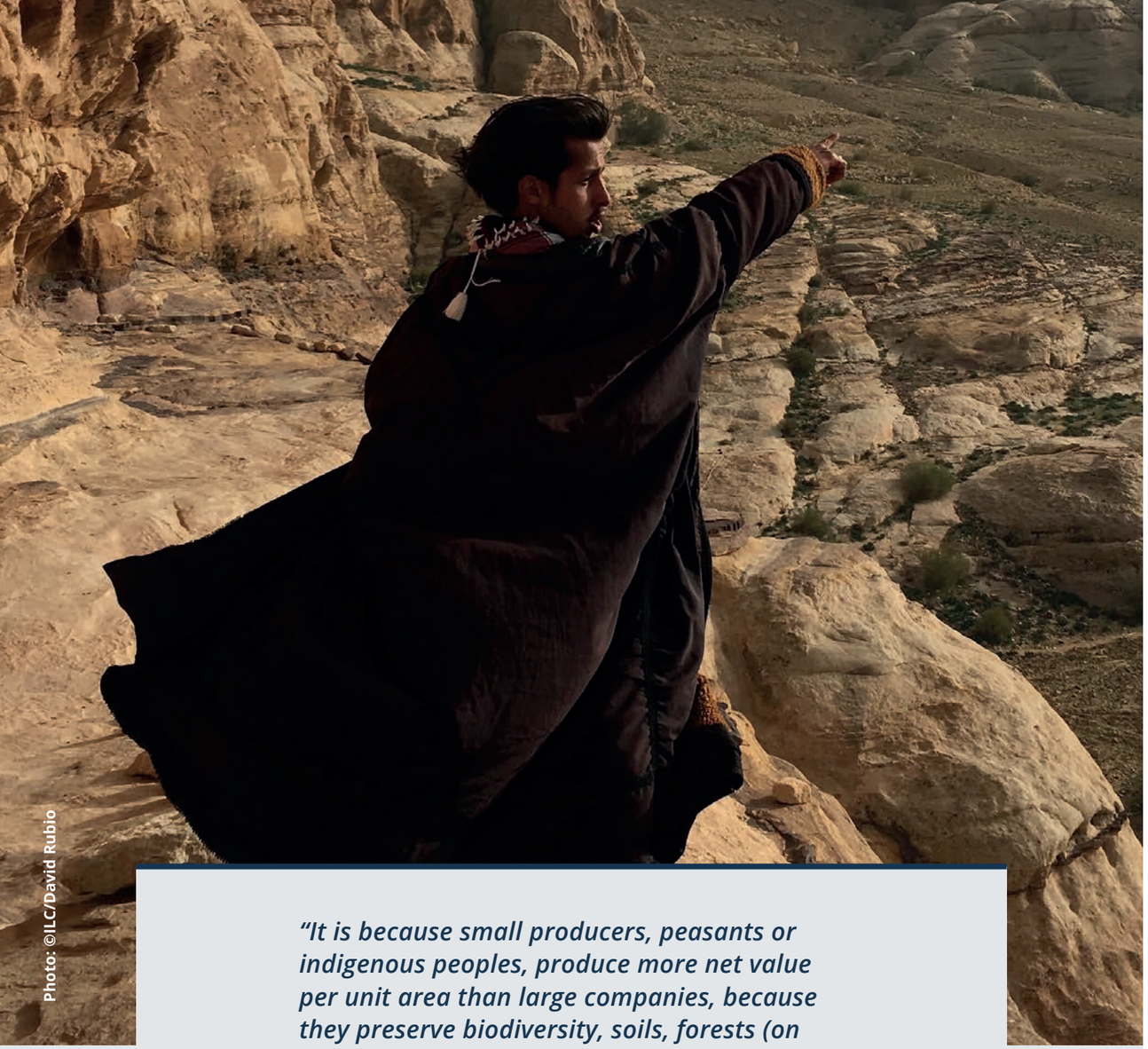

Photo: ©ILC/David Rubio

"It is because small producers, peasants or indigenous peoples, produce more net value per unit area than large companies, because they preserve biodiversity, soils, forests (on condition that they are not reduced to having to survive at all costs), and because their decisions respond to a logic of heritage and not to a logic of maximizing short-term profits, it is in everyone's interest not to allow an explosion of land inequalities"

Merlet (2020: 12), citing CTFD (2020)

5 CONCLUSION: THE URGENT NEED TO ACT ON LAND EQUALITY

There is an urgent need to act on land inequality if humanity is to make any significant progress towards global sustainability, stability, and social justice. As this synthesis report reveals, land inequality is greater than previously estimated, and it plays a role in numerous global challenges. Despite its importance, however, the tools to address it are weakly implemented and vested interests in current land distribution patterns are strong and hard to shift. Change is necessary.

Land is more concentrated and its ownership and control increasingly opaque

Measurements vary, but all come to the same conclusion: global land concentration has increased continuously since the 1980s. Today, when land size distribution is considered, the largest 1% of farms in the world operate more than 70% of the world's farmland (Lowder et al., 2019).

About 84% of farms are smaller than two hectares in size, but they operate only about 12% of farmland (Ibid). When the value of land is considered and when landless populations are accounted for, these measures of land inequality are 41% higher across sampled countries.

Beyond this, land inequality and control over land are increasingly opaque. Shareholdings in agricultural assets, particularly land, are not made public, with corporate entities and investors able to acquire parts of farms or multiple farms as assets. In addition, the ultimate beneficiaries and major investors in these corporate and financial firms, especially investment funds, are often unknown. Meanwhile, official household surveys or farm censuses that are relied on for farm size and distribution data do not pick up corporate and multiple land holdings within countries and even less so across borders. The control of production (instead of outright purchase or rent of land) is also difficult, if not impossible, to monitor and quantify. Land access, holding, and control over land are more unequal than we have presumed up to now, and much greater than we can effectively measure – for now.

Land inequality is amplified by gender, ethnicity, and culture

Horizontal inequality, which is inequality based on gender, ethnicity, or culture in specific groups of people, is interconnected with land access, ownership, and control. These types of inequality seriously undermine sustainability. This is because women, indigenous people, and local communities tend to be the custodians of household well-being, sustainable livelihoods, biodiversity preservation, bio-cultural conservation, and social justice.

It is thus in humanity's shared interest to prevent these types of land inequality from increasing.

Seeking horizontal equality in land should be understood not as replacing one tenure regime with another, nor as the destruction of important social relationships, but as an additional form of rights to be protected.

A polarised land and agri-food system

A key outcome of current trends is an increasingly bimodal and unequal land and agri-food system, with growing inequalities between the smallest landholders and the largest, and accelerating with the emergence of mega-farms in terms both of land size and value of production.

On one side are the globally dominant food systems largely controlled by a small number of corporations and financial institutions. This sector is driven by the logic of return on large-scale investments through corporate governance and industrial production systems aiming for economies of scale. This involves a degree of detachment of decision-making from the specificity of any particular piece of land or place – or "farming without farmers" (Wegerif and Anseeuw, 2020). At the other end of the spectrum are locally dominant agri-food systems, largely made up of small-scale producers and family farmers connected to particular pieces of land. These producers rely on established and low-external-input agricultural practices and link primarily to local and territorial markets involving many similar-scaled owner-operated enterprises in trading, processing, and retailing (Colque and Mamani, 2020; Espinosa Rincón and Jaramillo Gómez, 2020).

In reality these are not completely separate systems; there are many points of intersection, but they represent, in the scale and logic of their production, two approaches that are moving further and further apart. This is a highly unequal contest, as powerful actors will not only continue to accumulate land and take over production and market space but also exert influence to shape the policy environment and infrastructure in their favour.

The biggest danger is that the expansion of corporate-controlled agriculture will render the locally dominant system unviable, displacing people from their land and livelihoods with no meaningful alternatives.

Addressing land inequality means transforming power relations

The current global order – legal, corporate, and financial – is highly unlikely to stop or slow the rate of growing land inequality. Yet the impact of land inequality on other inequalities and global crises demands a response.

It is important to emphasise that land redistribution efforts alone will fail to ensure sustainable livelihoods, let alone prosperity, for the majority of rural people.

A range of measures is needed, including redistributive programmes, regulatory reforms, taxation, and accountability measures, not only in relation to land but across the agri-food sector, from inputs to retailing.

Such interventions will entail redressing the power imbalances affecting land and the agri-food sector, while also supporting more equitable relations between people and the land.

Regulation of land ownership, use, and distribution – and the regulation of corporate-controlled food systems in particular – will require greater transparency and the prevention of "hidden" shareholding and investors who are geographically and institutionally detached from the land and operations, and therefore difficult to hold to account for their economic, social, and environmental impacts.

Addressing land inequality addresses other inequalities and global crises

Land inequality is inter-related with other inequalities, whether they are social, economic, political, environmental, or territorial. Land inequality is also a cause and a consequence of many global crises and trends, from the democracy crisis and unemployment, youth disenfranchisement and mass migration, to climate change and the spread of pandemic diseases. Tackling land inequality could have a wide range of positive impacts on people, societies, and our planet's future.

Addressing land inequality is not only redressing asset and wealth inequality, it is also enabling the generation of more equal incomes from the land for those who till it, while reducing rent-seeking by a minority, and allowing for more inclusive development.

It will give a voice to a broader base of rural populations, strengthening democracies and making policies more participatory and, subsequently, less elite-biased. Its direct relationship with environmental inequality makes addressing land inequality a basis for more environmental sustainability, improved global biodiversity, strengthened bio-cultural conservation, and justice – although this will require ensuring that climate mitigation strategies minimise the demand for land and the consequent risk of exacerbating land inequalities. All of the above will be necessary stepping-stones towards more resilient and sustainable societies, where populations, even the most marginalised, including women, youth, indigenous peoples, and local communities, can thrive and migration is unnecessary as a last resort in economies with minimal labour absorption.

The need to embed land regulation into society

Land provides common goods, like biodiversity, water, and other natural resources. Relating to a finite commodity, land markets are not likely to self-regulate, and inevitably become markets of exclusion and concentration where inequalities steadily increase. As such, allowing land markets to develop independently of society cannot work. Abolishing all forms of market and entrusting the management of land only to states and governments is not a solution either. Land can be sold and bought, but land markets – and all land regulation interventions – must be regulated through human intervention and institutions to prevent them from creating perpetually unequal land patterns and societies.

The need to rebuild together and to deepen democracy

In order to reduce land inequality and establish permanent mechanisms to control its growth, it will be necessary to establish institutions based on collective rights that can establish rules with a certain degree of autonomy.

> *The overarching objective should be the construction of institutions and mechanisms to control and prevent land inequality that are compatible with broad social interests, and in line with the achievement of the SDGs.*

While governments need to lead and enforce reforms, it is likely that in most countries CSOs and local institutions will have to lead the way in demanding change, particularly in the power relations between citizens, corporate and financial interests, and the state. The strengthening of organisations that defend broader social and public interests in relation to land policy and land market regulation is absolutely essential.

Change will be hard, but not impossible

Land concentration is not inevitable. It is a product of elite control, corporate interests, and political choices. It is possible to put in place a very different system, building on existing initiatives with more equitable relations between people and with the land. Ideally, coordinated state action – across functions within national governments and between governments – is needed to turn this situation around. But this will only happen if governments can put aside their uncritical embrace of large-scale modernisation policies and act in the interests of their societies and future generations, with a total focus on the most vulnerable.

In the absence of, or alongside, any decisive state action, opportunities have to be built that allow greater autonomy for local food producers in production and distribution. The growth of various counter-movements, from food sovereignty to slow food and inclusive food chains, based on climate-smart and agroecological production models, shows that there is space for a different organisation of the production and distribution of food. This is shaped by new paradigms that draw on both old and new technologies, based on respectful and interdependent relations among people and with the natural environment.

Towards a blueprint for action

The following actions can contribute to taking us off the path of growing land inequality, and instead build more equitable access to land as a basis for a sustainable and inclusive future.

- **Democratise land governance**
  Land governance, from national policies to local institutions, should be based on broad representation. Decision-making should include representatives of the state and organisations of producers and other local land users. These should function in the framework of people-centred land policy frameworks and governance structures, aimed at the common good.
- **Strengthen land-related regulation**
  Governments should develop land ownership, land use, and land distribution policies and institutions to address patterns of land inequality and their drivers. At national and decentralised levels, these should be reconceived based on broad social consensus, in light of contemporary circumstances and taking into account the full range of causes and impacts of land inequality.
- **Invest in well-functioning land registries**
  Governments and their partners should invest in institutions and technology for efficient and fully transparent land registries, including at decentralised levels. Land registries should include information regarding institutional ownership and control of land through sophisticated financial instruments, including listed and unlisted funds. This provides an informed basis for land taxation and other redistributive measures.

- **Strengthen transparency and monitoring of land holdings**
  Governments should ensure public access to information about all transfers of rights to use land, whether through purchase, rental, usage, or shareholding. At the same time, there should be greater investment in the capacity of citizen-led monitoring initiatives, including the monitoring of companies and their shareholders operating in agriculture and land-related activities and controlling production. Public support, including development finance for investments or projects, should be contingent on the release of all relevant information.
- **Legally enforce responsible corporate practice**
  Governments, especially of investor countries, should hold companies registered in their jurisdictions to account. They should oblige companies to report against the principles of key international frameworks, including the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, the OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises, and the Principles for Responsible Investment in Agriculture of the CFS. Legal frameworks of host countries should be upgraded to be equal to or stronger than the standards of international frameworks.
- **Protect common and customary rights**
  Governments should recognise and protect customary land claims, ranging from legally recognised and documented community land rights through to non-statutory and undocumented rights. An urgent task is recognising the territorial rights and governance systems of indigenous peoples. In all cases, free, prior, and informed consent should be a standard procedure for all decisions affecting the territories of indigenous people and local communities.
- **Recognise and protect women's land rights**
  Governments should ensure gender equality in land rights, in law and in practice. This requires a range of actions, from legislating for equal opportunity and rights to encouraging adaptation of social norms, attitudes, or behaviours that support women's self-directed decision-making and ability to benefit from land. Legal mechanisms should enforce women's rights to land when they are under threat and provide mechanisms for redress, including in collective land tenure systems.
- **Respect and strengthen civil society institutions and capacities**
  Strong CSOs have a key role to play in monitoring, promoting accountability, and challenging power relations. Powerful and representative constituency-based organisations – belonging to farmers, pastoralists, indigenous peoples, women, and fisher folks – can ensure that the voices and priorities of land users are heard.
- **Build more sustainable and equitable production models and food systems**
  Governments should support the more resilient and sustainable production models of small-scale producers and family farmers. This means allowing them greater autonomy from corporate production systems and the ability to get reasonable returns from employing agroecological, or at least low-external-input, production practices, linked with local markets. Public investment is needed not just for their access to good-quality land, but also for improved public market spaces, protection of national agricultural produce markets from international commodity market pressures, research for improved ecologically sound inputs such as seed and genetic stock, and appropriate storage and processing technologies.

A transformative agenda of this magnitude is not optional. It is urgent and is in the interests of all humanity, for more resilient, sustainable, and equitable societies.

Change will require broad-based action, involving state institutions at all levels, donors and development partners, the private sector, and, not least, people's organisations, farmers, and all those who make their living from land.

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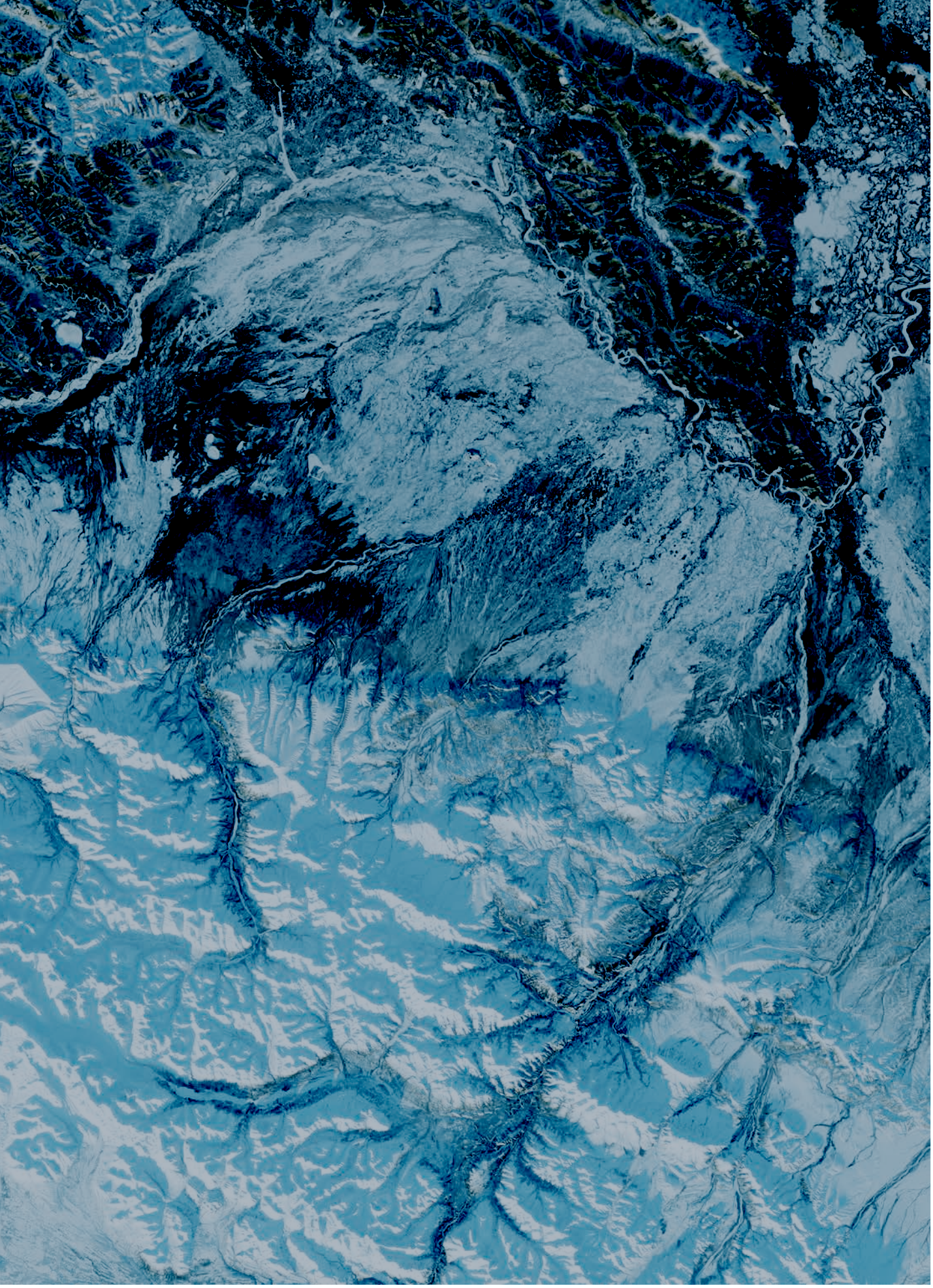
Land Inequality Initiative

is steered by an informal reference group, composed of experts in the field of land and wider inequalities.

Members of the reference group did provide guidance and expertise throughout the process and include the following organisations:



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