

The Untold Story: How Media Coverage Can Change the Narrative on Land and Property Rights

It is estimated that more than one billion people lack secure land property rights - the formal recognition and protection of the right to use and have property. Without legally recognized documentation, they face the risk of wrongful eviction from their homes and land. But the impact is much bigger: a lack of property rights ultimately leads to a vicious cycle of social and financial instability that weakens economies.

Land rights experts are familiar with this narrative – but these issues usually only make the headlines in the world's media when conflicts over land become violent: when indigenous people fight companies over their land, when slum dwellers are evicted from their makeshift homes, when armed conflict or natural disasters drive large numbers of people from their homes.

Far less attention is paid to what lack of secure tenure means in people's daily lives. How does it affect countries trying to attract investment to bolster development and what does it mean for companies and investors whose bottom line is at stake when projects clash with the needs of local people?

If you think about it, land and property rights protect the house you live in, the roads you use, the water you drink, the garden you planted. Imagine if your birth was not recorded? Do you exist at all? And if your property or land was never registered – or the country you live in has no way of formalizing ownership – how do you prove it is yours? What rights do you have if the bulldozers come to take your house from you?

And how do people cope with the increasing pressure on urban space that pushes rents and house prices sky-high in places in many cities, turning them into inequality hotspots. What can be done to scale solutions across cities, countries and continents? Who are the innovators and what are they doing?

As the world is on a deadline to achieve the sustainable development goals by 2030, the presentation will address what journalists can do to change the conversation on land and property rights and increase the level of awareness of this important issue.

It will examine what it takes to broaden the lens and bring property rights to a bigger audience, focusing not only on the problems but also highlighting solutions brought about by local people themselves, or through technology, policy changes and new legal structures.

During the presentation, conference participants will be able to see how Place, the first digital news platform dedicated specifically to under-reported land and property rights issues has evolved since its launch in 2016. This innovative website brings the stories of people faced with insecure property rights to a global audience via the Reuters news service and examines how governments and corporations are addressing this issue.

The presentation will feature examples and how they have had an impact, from our reporting in the world's five biggest slums to Tanzanian 'witches' and Pokémon Go to the growing debate about property rights in space and the use of drones to sort out land titles.

The presentation will also explore land and property rights reporting trends in the world's media and the impact that news coverage can have globally. The presentation will also highlight the growing role of social media in bringing property rights to a wider – and younger – audience.

It will also show the power of documentary filmmaking as a key tool in changing the narratives on land and property rights, with examples of films from Africa and Latin America that highlight the tension between development projects and the insecure tenure of indigenous and local communities that have lived on the embattled land for generations.

The presentation will offer participants the opportunity to share perspectives and discuss how policymakers, civil society, corporations and communities can work with journalists to change the narratives of global land rights reporting.

Participants will also have the chance to discuss how the media coverage of land policy and property rights issues has evolved, how the issues are being reported, and explore the role of journalists in bringing the stories to a wider public – turning land rights from a niche subject into one of the biggest stories of the century.