



Land Governance in an Interconnected World

ANNUAL WORLD BANK CONFERENCE ON LAND AND POVERTY
WASHINGTON DC, MARCH 19-23, 2018



The Challenges of Multi-Level and Multi-Stakeholder Land Tenure Projects - The case of Burundi

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In Burundi, a great number of legal disputes relates to conflicts over land and these land conflicts frequently result in violence (Kohlhagen n.d.). Since 2007, attempts have been made to set up land security projects in Burundi. The main concern was to secure land tenure in the context of widespread tenure insecurity. The initiative for this came from the Burundian Government along with its technical and financial partners. In 2010, in the context of an alarming increase in insecurity of land tenure, exacerbated by refugee return, the government adopted a new land policy. The policy described the various areas of intervention to deal effectively and efficiently with the problem of land insecurity, which was considered to be a "time bomb". In 2011, to fulfil this mission, the Government of Burundi put in place a new land law, enshrining land registration and certification in a decentralized manner, designed to increase efficiency, and bring land certification closer to the population in a more affordable way.

All levels of government have been involved in one way or another in these land registration/certification activities. At the level of the technical and financial partners, many donors became involved, each with different approaches and various financial resources while freely choosing their area of intervention. It became apparent that a general obstacle to broader success of these ventures was a lack of coordination between the different actors, particularly within the government (Kohlhagen 2012: 4). At present, at least 50 municipalities have land services set up with the support of several stakeholders. The challenges of harmonizing interventions and approaches are acute because there are disparities in strategies, tools and techniques, practices and approaches.

Multidimensional challenges are observed in land tenure management. On the one hand, there are the challenges (1) relating to the strategies, techniques, practices and approaches to be adopted for sound land registration and certification; (2) on the other hand, there are the challenges concerning the different levels of decision-making and intervention in this sector. Furthermore, there are the choices made by donors and the financial means available.

This paper analyses these different challenges, it points out central deficiencies as well as ways to address them, The paper shows how the various actors involved in land tenure registration in Burundi can be seen as an asset as well as an obstacle in some ways. The paper also draws on practical experience with the Burundian land tenure registration to highlight how workable solutions can be found that enable external actors such as NGOs to work together with government agencies to set up efficient land administration structures.

ZOA's land tenure registration program in Burundi¹

ZOA is an international NGO based in the Netherlands working in 15 countries in Asia and Africa. It works on land rights issues in three countries of the African Great Lakes Region: Uganda, DR Congo and Burundi.

The vast majority of people in Burundi is dependent on agriculture for their income and livelihoods (see: Hilhorst 2013). At the same time, the average size of landholdings has been shrinking over the past

¹ The project related data in following sections is to a large part based on the paper: *The Missing Link: Successes And Lessons Learned From An Integrated Approach To Land Tenure Registration In Burundi*, David Betge, Roland Zuidema, Jean Pierre Irutingabo, Hendrik Westerbeek, World Bank Land and Poverty Conference, 2017
https://www.conftool.com/landandpoverty2017/index.php?page=browseSessions&print=yes&doprint=yes&form_session=577&presentations=show

decades while the return of people who fled from the civil war has contributed to a significant rise in conflicts over land. These land conflicts are highly complex and range from intra-family disputes on heritage rights to disputes between repatriates and residents. Traditional and state authorities are involved in the resolution of these conflicts on the local level but in many cases, these are overburdened with the number and the complexity of the cases, particularly because the property rights are often not formally registered and conflicts between formal and customary rights exist. The formalized land registration in Burundi is based on the land law (code foncier) of 2011, which introduced land certificates as alternatives to titles for the registration of customary land rights and decentralized the land administration (Hilhorst/Porchet 2012). The land law provided for the establishment of communal land services (*Service Foncier Communal* – SFC) in charge of delivering titles to land owners. It also mandated the establishment of communal commissions as part of the SFC in charge of measuring the plots and addressing land conflicts on the local level (*Commission de Reconnaissance Collinaire* – CRC). A third state institution that was created for the land tenure program was the national land commission (*Commission Nationale des terres et autres biens* – CNTB). This commission is tasked with the resolution of conflicts related to land and originating in the different wars in the past. While at first the commission was strongly oriented at finding amicable solutions, mediating between the interests of repatriates and residents, the CNTB later changed their mediating approach towards one that was stronger oriented towards delivering verdicts. The role of the commission has been controversially discussed, with some stakeholders feeling that it has a certain political bias (RFI 2015).

Several decentralized projects were started over the past years, addressing land rights issues through setting up and building the capacities of the SFCs in the context of land registration. A number of different non-governmental organizations were leading these decentralized efforts. While the land law was supposed to integrate the existing customary system with statutory law, it was met with strong reservations by the population and people still continue to show a certain resistance towards accepting the new system of land certification (IDLO/ZOA 2016).

In late 2013, the Dutch Humanitarian organization ZOA started a project financed by the Netherlands Embassy in Bujumbura, designed to indicate ways of bridging the gap between the various individual land registration projects and an envisioned scaled-up land registration program initiated on the national level, which would need to be implemented in a decentralized but coherent way (ZOA 2013). Since then, this project increased its scope with support from USAID and received follow-up funding by the Netherlands embassy.

ZOA targets areas with high levels of repatriation of former refugees and displaced people and a special focus is put on safeguarding the interests of women in the process of land rights registration. Furthermore, ensuring the financial sustainability of the SFC was defined as a central objective. ZOA cooperates with local partner Mi-Parec (Ministry for Peace and Reconciliation under the Cross) who support the project in resolving conflicts related to land (ibid.). The combination of land registration and conflict resolution is central to the project. Mediation between conflict parties, particularly between returnees and residents, and a recording of the results of these mediations are seen as the basis for ensuring sustainable conflict resolution and tenure security of all parties (ibid.). Therefore, MiParec supports the CRCs with training in mediation practices and takes over mediations in particularly complex cases.

A study on the challenges related to the Burundian land registration process published in 2013 indicated that better capacities of national-level actors and an integration of the ground level efforts with national policies and objectives are needed, while at the same time a strong focus needs to be put on the local acceptance of the measures (Hilhorst 2013). Generally, the land tenure registration projects in Burundi are seen as essential aspects of broader efforts to increase peace and stability as well as to contribute to food security for the population (Netherlands Embassy Office Bujumbura-Burundi 2011). In order to achieve these objectives several conditions have to be met. First, land conflicts have to be resolved before a piece of land is registered. It is also important to ensure the acceptance of registration procedures by the local communities and not least the local traditional authorities. The process of registration must also not contribute to the weakening of existing rights such as customary rights of women. If all these conditions are met, people receiving land certificates need to be ensured that these certificates will in fact contribute to their tenure security. Therefore, local state authorities need to have

the capacities to enforce the land rights of individuals. They also need to be informed of all land transfers after the issuing of certificates, because otherwise the registry will become unreliable.

ZOA aspired to design its land tenure program in Burundi in a way that would meet these concerns and challenges. The general objective of the program is that the owners of the targeted areas have sufficiently secure land rights to allow them to invest in their land and to intensify agricultural production (IDLO/ZOA 2016). While there is widespread consensus of the potential benefits of land certification, establishing a land titling system that de facto contributes to the intended long-term development goals has been an immense challenge, both in Burundi and in other post-conflict states. ZOA's innovative land tenure registration (LTR) projects, currently being in their extension phase in Mabanda and Vugizo communes (funded by The Netherlands Embassy in Burundi), Makamba commune and in preparation phase in Nyanza Lac commune (funded by USAID) try to prove an exception to the rule. ZOA's work in Mabanda, Makamba and Vugizo communes has already led to the registration of 43.452 parcels of land and the resolution of 4.575 conflicts, almost 70 percent of all conflicts encountered throughout the project.

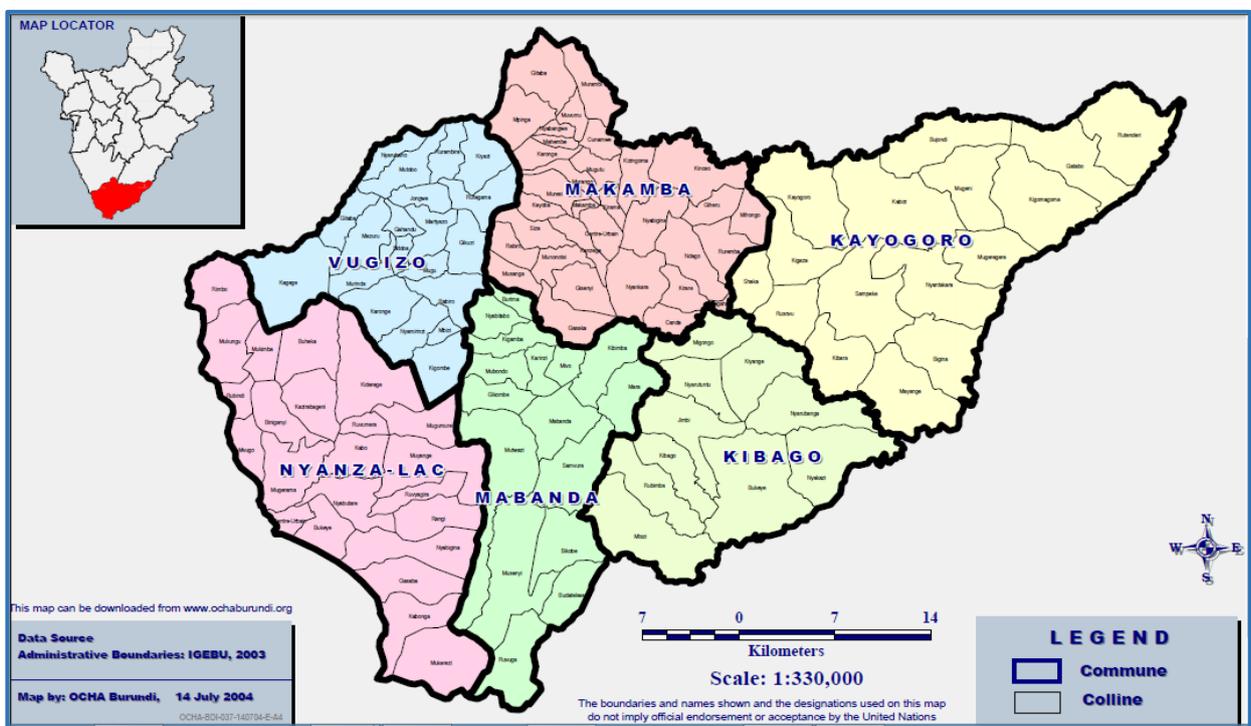


Figure 1 Communes of the province of Makamba, with Nyanza Lac in the South-West, and Kibago and Kayogoro in the East.

ZOA Burundi envisions an integrated approach for development. Assuring land rights is a basic element for promoting peace and stability which are on their turn crucial conditions for sustainable development. The core of the program is the registration of the location of a plot of land and the dimensions of the parcel. This data is put on a certificate so that the owner has evidence, which helps to reduce uncertainties and conflicts concerning boundaries. A public registry ensures that everyone who wants to acquire land can verify who the owner is and that his (or her) assertions as to the dimensions and other aspects of the land are true. ZOA followed a systematic and comprehensive approach with a proactive, cluster-wide provision of registration services and complementary activities for its program (approche groupée). This means, that in a targeted area, the objective is to have all households register their land, requiring all households to be informed of the process and its objectives and to recognize the benefits of participating. The alternative to this would have been a demand-driven, un-systématique approach, relying mostly on building the capacity of state actors who would only register plots of individuals approaching the authorities directly themselves (approche isolée).

The comprehensive (group) approach tries to address the social complexities of land tenure registration with a strong focus on recognizing and addressing conflicts. ZOA's land rights program was designed as part of a holistic approach integrated in interventions by ZOA and other organizations targeting the effects of tensions over refugee resettlement, high population growth and declining agricultural productivity. In this sense, the land registration program relates to efforts for intensifying agricultural production through distributing agricultural inputs such as e.g. seeds, fertilizer, organic manure or goats and providing trainings on agriculture in the same program areas conducted by ZOA and partner organizations. A basic idea of the program is that conflict mediation, land certification and activities aimed at increased investments in agriculture and increased agricultural productivity are mutually reinforcing (ZOA 2013). The first step of the land tenure program was a large-scale assessment of land conflicts in the intervention area followed by a mediation of the identified conflicts. The solutions to these conflicts were then made sustainable by the registration of plots. While conflict resolution institutions existed in the Burundian context on the *colline* (hill) level; such as the elected leaders of the *colline* and traditional *bashingantahe* ('men of integrity' serving as conflict mediators and justices), the land code of 2011 made it necessary to create an additional institution capable of handling a relatively large number of conflicts. Therefore, the *Recognition Committees on Colline* level were created (CRCs). These committees publicly establish whether there are land disputes regarding a plot, determine who occupies that land and who holds the de facto rights to that land and conduct plot surveys using handheld GPS devices, mobile phones with Kobo collect software and aerial photos. All of the neighbors of the particular plot participate in this exercise. The outcomes of the process are published and if after a period of 15 days no objection is made a certificate can be issued. The owner needs to retrieve the certificate from the SFC office. After this has happened there follows another 30 day period during which objections to the registration can be voiced. In case that someone disagrees with the registration and the conflict cannot be mediated, the case is taken to the CNTB or a responsible court.

The need for comprehensive, systematic registration and cooperation with the state

The reason why ZOA chose a systematic, comprehensive approach to land tenure registration that builds on both, cooperation with state actors as well as cooperation with communities and traditional leaders is the realization that the failure of previous, similar projects lies at least partly in an insufficient involvement of all stakeholders and a too strong focus in either top-down approaches or bottom-up work. The former type tends to be much too reliant on the capacities and interest of state actors that can to some degree be the cause of problems rather than the solution. The latter type of approach might be strong in creating community consensus and allowing broad access by vulnerable groups but lacks sustainability if state actors are not able or willing to protect the identified rights. A number of the projects and processes in Burundi were found to be not sufficiently participatory and vulnerable groups were not effectively protected (Kohlhagen 2012: 6). Moreover, there have also been problems with coordination and cooperation among different actors. This led to a lack of coherency in the building of land tenure registration systems.

Without going into details on the specific case of Burundi, on a general level, problems with coordination can mean insufficient sharing of experiences but also that there is not enough attention being paid to supporting state actors in a coherent way from the side of donors. This means that e.g. one donor focuses on supporting the government with setting up data infrastructure for spatial databases that are needed for long-term rights protection while another turns to a strong support for grassroots work and a third to private investments in the agricultural sector for economic development without necessarily coordinating within the donor community while all three of these different foci impact on land (administration) issues but in different ways. In turn, NGOs financed by these donors might also not sufficiently coordinate/communicate their changes in strategy leaving the land rights related development work in a country strongly incoherent. Such lack of coordination and communication has the potential to fuel new conflicts, e.g. around the acquisition of land by investors with negative effects on local communities (see also: van Leeuwen et al 2016b). The complex actor constellations and multiple interests in the context of comprehensive tenure reforms in poor and fragile countries make coordination particularly difficult. It is possible, for example, that the creation of new institutions in the context of land reform programs contributes to authority struggles between state and traditional

authorities, leading to confusion among local populations and complicating conflict resolutions (Kobusingye et al 2016). Earlier comparisons among other countries implementing similar programs found that in general, middle-income countries were quite successful in their efforts while low-income countries especially in sub-Saharan Africa did not achieve very positive results (Platteau 1996 cited after IDLO/ZOA 2016).

In the Burundian case it seems that the recent issues relating to cooperating with the government as well as a lack of coordination among different development actors has led to a situation in which it is not quite clear what strategies are most suitable to create a functioning land administration system that allows for systematic rights protection and empowers vulnerable stakeholder groups. ZOA's work shows that cooperation with local and provincial governments and administrations is possible and necessary. At the same time, strong participation of local communities is needed and a participatory and open dialogue needs to be facilitated. This cannot be the sole responsibility of local actors but needs to be a priority to all involved in this kind of work. The rights of women, which are dependent on the rights of men in the customary context in Burundi, can only be bolstered through carefully facilitated discourse. Local populations might at times be unwilling to participate in these kinds of interactions. Because of this, unusual but simple strategies have been devised by ZOA to meet these challenges including door-to-door awareness-raising, programs, and "Tumeny'ivy'amatongo yacu"-awareness-raising, described in more detail below. These initiatives have been used to create active and open dialogue in communities through exhibitions and role playing that feature questions and answers directed at the full life cycle of land registry and certification.

Successes and Lessons learned

One of the first things to mention with regard to the impact of ZOA's work is that there has been an increase in land transactions over the last three years, which has even picked up since the registration process started. This suggests that the registration facilitates the transactions of real estate, even though the specific causal relationship is not yet clear (IDLO/ZOA 2016). Second, the initial registrations seemed to correlate with a decrease in criminal cases related to land. In later phases of the program, this correlation was less clear and the data available does not allow for inferences on causal relations. So far, the resolution of conflicts in the program areas is going well. The reports of CRCs and the testimony of beneficiaries show that people decide to have their conflicts mediated instead of taking them to court and some withdrew their cases from court and decided to go through a mediation instead.

In order to contribute to stable, sustainable solutions people need to accept the conflict resolutions also after the registration is conducted (ibid.). The findings from the ZOA program are generally in line with other research indicating that land registration can have positive impacts on conflicts but effective conflict mediation needs to be in place (see e.g. Holden et al 2011). There are many indications in the broader literature that whether land registration has a positive or a negative impact on conflicts is very much context dependent and the specific setup of the registration is crucial. The respondents of the mid-term study on ZOA's land registration program almost unanimously declared that they perceived a positive impact on conflicts and reported a reduction of, in particular, boundary conflicts through the program (ZOA/IDLO 2016 p. 34). Continuous learning and a flexible approach to the project were necessary to achieve this.

A central challenge in the beginning was the attendance rate of the sensitization campaigns. The idea was to conduct meetings at the village level to inform people about all the aspects of the land registration process. It showed that people were strongly occupied by their agricultural activities and did not attend the meetings. Of those attending, men were the majority while women were vastly underrepresented. ZOA then decided to conduct door-to-door information campaigns. To this end '*vulgarisateurs*' or outreach-persons from the communities were selected to conduct the information visits. This strategy was much more effective than the group meetings and is being replicated in a new USAID funded project, which ZOA started in 2017 (ZOA 2015). The mid-term study confirmed that in the areas where registration was put in place people are broadly informed about the process and aware of its objectives to improve land tenure security and resolve land conflicts (IDLO/ZOA 2016). A second, and newly developed strategy to reach people, is the public performance of informational sketches in central places such as church squares and other common meeting places at the *colline* and sub-*colline* level. People are called for "Tumeny'ivy'Amatongo yacu" meetings, meaning approximately: "Let's know all what

concerns our plots of land” in Kirundi. After the performances, questions related to land rights and the registration process are asked to the attendees and for correct answers people can win useful prizes such as hoes, bottles, the land code book or mobile phones. These campaigns reached much more people than the original village level meetings and members of the Recognition Committees (CRCs) expressed their regret that this method was not used from the beginning, because in their opinion it would have been highly useful for reaching all stakeholders to inform them on the land registration process from the start.

On a more technical note, the use of the Kobo software and the integration of the demarcated plots into ArcGis maps has proven to be very useful and the demarcation teams have developed impressive skills in using these tools. The usage of aerial photos serves to correct errors of the GPS measuring, which usually has an accuracy of around 2 meters (the photos have an accuracy of 50cm). Nevertheless, there are not many people in Burundi who are capable of using these tools and there is a strong need for extensive training if the tenure program is to be taken to scale. Furthermore, the technical infrastructure on the communal level and on the higher levels of government need further improvement. This means that e.g. the collected data still is not stored on central government servers but solely in the cloud and on individual computers. Only if such infrastructure is established can the data of the registration process be fully used for purposes of analysis and planning to facilitate positive development impacts. Improving the technical infrastructure is one of a number of central challenges for the future.

Challenges

One of the central issues is increasing women’s tenure security. While legally, women’s land rights can be registered, this does not always ensure the factual access to land e.g. after the death of a husband. Furthermore, while the land code allows for the registration of land in the name of women particularly in the beginning this rarely happened (IDLO/ZOA 2016). Other land management programs in Burundi in the past had very similar problems. The evaluation of a project implemented by the Swiss Development Cooperation (SDC) in Ngozi province between 2008 and 2014 showed that the share of land titles registered in the name of women are low. In 2012, 6 percent of the titles were registered in the name of women, in 2013 this even reduced to 5 percent (IDLO/ZOA 2016: 49). In the context of the ZOA program, it showed that plots registered for families in the name of family heirs frequently came under dispute. Intra-family disputes are a strong challenge by which women are again particularly affected and it seems that the conflict resolution approach is not effectively targeting these problems as it was designed to mainly address conflicts between repatriates and residents (IDLO/ZOA 2016). Having been made aware of these issues through the mid-term evaluation the program has focused on making CRC members aware of intra-family disputes and enabled them to address these. This seems to have had a strong positive impact which will need to be validated by the next round of impact studies.

There are indications that people would like to see stronger government support with rural development. However, it is unclear if the government has the capacity or intention to set up and implement broad rural development programs with a focus on improving people’s livelihoods. Investments in the agricultural sector have not been a strong priority of the government in the past, even though it has shown strong support for the issue of land tenure registration. This could be a task for donors in the future and is a central point that underlines the need for coherence in not only the work of NGOs but also and possibly more important the spending priorities of donors. This is not to say that there is no attention for rural development, but there should be a much stronger focus of explicitly aligning this with the land tenure registration work that is being conducted.

A key aspect with regard to improving women’s factual land rights is that for sustainable rights for women to be established in the Burundian context (as well as in others) strong, participatory communication processes are needed, which enable consensus-based agreements. This is difficult to address through a mere land certification project. Land tenure projects do generally not create rights but register existing rights. Furthermore, in the formal process of legalization (or registration, documentation etc.) the complexities of existing (customary) rights can get lost. Customary law often grants secondary land rights to women. Although less strong than those granted to men, these rights offer some protection to the interests of women. They function, in particular, as a sort of insurance against misfortunes, such as

a long illness of the husband, his death, or a divorce. It is not always possible to register such rights, and even if feasible, the groups concerned are not necessarily aware of these registered rights or do not know how to make use of them. As a result, registration can lead to a significant erosion of the security of land rights and the welfare of women (IDLO/ZOA 2016: 11). While ground level efforts such as those conducted by ZOA play an important role in strengthening the tenure security of people and supporting women in becoming advocates of their own rights, if the broader social and political framework, including dominant discourses on women's rights, are not supportive of the envisioned changes, this poses a significant obstacle to achieving the overall objectives. A central hurdle to women is e.g. that they are legally not allowed to inherit land. While a change in the Burundian succession law has been announced this was not realized yet and is subject to strong political debate.

Another recurring and problematic issue is the role or, more specifically, the capacity of the local governments. Changes in land use and ownership are often not brought to the attention of the communal land service. Through this, conflicts around land are in some cases increased. ZOA has initiated an SMS information service to lower the transaction costs related to the interactions between people and government, which makes it easier and more convenient to maintain the land registration service, but this is only a first step towards improvements. The SMS service has not delivered the necessary results due to various factors, not least the fact that large parts of the population are illiterate. The heads of the CRCs were supposed to report changes in land holdings and the CRC members were asked to report all land transactions during weekly meetings but feedback on this was minimal. Communal land registration officers are now being asked to conduct regular visits at the *collines* to enquire on changes, which were not reported to the CRCs or the SFC but this method is time consuming, strongly dependent on the cooperation of the local people and requires strong engagement and “people skills” on the side of the CRC team. All three are not always sufficiently available.

Conclusion

Despite the existing successes, the major challenge that remains is the need for a greater effectiveness of the existing land services as well as a better integration with agricultural development efforts. 50 of the 129 communes in Burundi are provided with land services. However, with the exception of the municipalities that have been supported by the Swiss Cooperation from 2008 to 2017 and those supported by ZOA, who has differentiated its success through their inclusive systematic approach, the remaining 41 communes have produced ineffective results. The failed results have used a voluntary demand-driven approach that has is deemed biased towards the rich and detrimental to the poor. The failures have favoured men at the expense of women who, in most cases, face enormous difficulties due to cultural barriers and lack of financial means. There is a strong need for systematic land tenure registration that delivers improved cooperation between all stakeholders, both private and public and with an advocacy-based approach using all the practical experiences on the local level. This also requires more and strategic learning to allow informed choices. The international (donor) community could also complementarily support programs like the Burundian land tenure registration with awareness raising campaigns and legal aid services (see: Foley 2007). Furthermore, donors in cooperation with the government should consciously decide on the kind of approach to building a functioning and accessible land administration system in Burundi that will be supported in the future. The lack of an efficient supportive framework of the Burundian land tenure program is not only due to limited capacities on the political and administrative level. There is a strong need for better coordination and cooperation among all actors involved on the various levels where the creation of a land administration system needs to be tackled – this specifically means donors and implementers.

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