

# **Scaling up Innovations to Protect Women’s Customary Land Rights:** *Practical Experiences from four Chiefdoms in Sierra Leone*

**Rexford A. Ahene, Samuel Mabikke, and MariaPaola Rizzo**

## **Abstract**

Since the end of the conflict in 2002<sup>1</sup>, Sierra Leone has made significant progress in consolidating peace and security gains and in rebuilding its economy. However, these gains have not sufficiently translated into equal distribution of development dividends for the population, and particularly women. It has been repeatedly argued that tension over land, alongside the highly unequal distribution of other natural resources, was a key driver of the Sierra Leone civil war<sup>2</sup>. While 58% of all households and 86% of rural households in Sierra Leone are estimated to engage in agriculture, 70% of the agricultural workforce are women.

The 2017 National Land Policy (NLP) acknowledges that women in Sierra Leone typically experience restricted access to land, have unclear ownership and property rights and are more vulnerable to land loss and seizure. As the government considers feasible National Land P implementation strategies, priorities have been set to ensure rural women and men in the provinces are able to negotiate women’s rights and access in order to overcome the deeply rooted discriminatory social and cultural practices.

Within the framework of implementing the Voluntary Guidelines on Responsive Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests in the context of national food security (VGGT), the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations developed the Open Tenure and Solutions for Open Land Administration (SOLA) geospatial tools for recording and mapping of women’s land rights to ensure that rural women in the provinces are able to negotiate their rights of access, use and ownership of land. A context analysis of the critical aspects influencing and hindering women’s land rights in three ethnically diverse customary tenure communities of Temne, Limba and Mende tribes was conducted to understand the current customary land tenure practices in three districts of Bombali in the North, Bo in the South, Kenema in the East and Port Loko in the North West. The process entailed training and strengthening capacities of women and men as community women’s land rights leaders, advocates and trainers with the appropriate skills and technical competence to participate in land rights clarification decisions. Twelve (12) villages in four (4) chiefdoms of Paki-Massabong in Bombali district, Selenga in Bo district, Kandu Lekpiama in Kenema district and Burey in Port Loko district have mapped through a participatory process involving the Paramount Chiefs, Chiefdom Council, Ministry of Land, Housing and Environment, Local Council Authorities and Civil Society Organizations.

This paper presents the empirical findings from nine (9) villages in three (3) select chiefdoms in Sierra Leone. The findings are significant in influencing the newly approved National Land

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<sup>1</sup> Sierra Leone has been ravaged by a civil war that lasted from 1991 to 2002, and resulted in some 70,000 casualties and 2.6 million displaced people.

<sup>2</sup> Richards et al., 2004; Hussein and Gnisci, 2005; Richards, 2005; Unruh, 2008; IRIN, 2012)

Policy which calls for innovative approaches and solutions for land administration in Sierra Leone. The findings are also timely as different development partners are exploring opportunities and entry points for scaling up customary land administration using fit-for purpose innovative geospatial technologies.

**Keywords:** Solutions for Open Land Administration, fit for purpose land administration, National Land Policy