

Informing policy and practice on secure land tenure rights and governance

The Challenge

Secure tenure refers to the ability to use and control the use of land without the fear of eviction or other restrictions. Secure and clearly defined rights to access, use, control and transfer land create incentives for people to invest in improving their homes and farming operations to enhance their welfare and generate incomes. In Africa, most people hold customary land rights, derived from historical land occupation by kin groups, informal rental markets or negotiated transfers. Generally undocumented, these rights are at risk of non-recognition or curtailment due to discriminatory cultural norms (in the case of women's rights) or action by the state or third parties, under weak governance systems. Land registers in Africa have been estimated to capture only 3–10% of national populations; available data for 140 countries suggests that on average 20% of adults feel insecure, and around 1 billion people are living in fear of eviction. However, until 2017, there was no standardised way of presenting cross-country data on land tenure insecurity, or agreement on how it should be collected.



Smallholder farmers in Maragra, Mozambique, engaged in participatory land rights mapping, to identify and secure their plots | Photo provided by Terra Firma

Our Approach

Since 2000, NRI research led by Professor Julian Quan has emphasised the significance of secure land tenure rights as one important condition for overcoming poverty and hunger, for women's empowerment, and for sustainable urban development and natural resource use – demonstrating the cross-cutting relevance of land to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

- Research led by Prof Quan has engaged with African policy makers, practitioners and international agencies to argue successfully for the legal recognition of customary tenure rights in Africa alongside traditional land titling as a route to deliver tenure security for all.
- However, systems and methods to monitor land tenure at country and global scales are not yet in place. Work on land indicators by Prof Quan and NRI Associate Professor Ravinder Kumar directly assisted UN-Habitat in developing methodologies and providing technical and capacity-building support for countries to report on progress in strengthening land rights. This work was undertaken in consultation with global actors including the World Bank, UN Agencies and Statistical Offices, the African Union's Land Policy Centre, international NGOs, and bilateral donors.
- NRI's research and professional engagement with land programmes in Ghana and Mozambique found that documentation of land rights and measurement of tenure security now needs to be extended beyond the community to the household level and be fully gender disaggregated, to cover all forms of tenure, and all social groups, as official land records are invariably incomplete and not inclusive, not reflecting the real situation or providing adequate security for land rights on the ground, incentives or opportunities to invest in land and homes, or access benefits and services. Land users' perceptions of tenure security matter but are rarely addressed by land policies or official monitoring.
- NRI research found that stand-alone national land rights surveys are not cost-effective or practical; alternatively, land tenure modules can be incorporated into existing national censuses and surveys. Combining statistical and administrative datasets from multiple sources and adopting a spatially and socio-economically disaggregated perspective enables measurement of progress in making land rights secure, and meaningful cross-country or sub-national comparisons.
- In 2018, a survey of 15 National Statistical Organisations by NRI researchers concluded that, while capacity building is needed, collaboration of government land and statistical agencies and civil society is needed to validate national land tenure datasets, monitor change over time, identify priorities to be addressed and promote joint action to document and improve tenure conditions of poor, vulnerable and less powerful groups (for whom available quantitative data is likely to be limited and less reliable).

Our Impact

NRI research led by Prof Quan has helped to shift global thinking, policy and practice to recognise the importance of secure land tenure rights and the design of tenure security programmes.

- **NRI research highlighted the need to recognise and protect all legitimate land rights and influenced global development policy thinking and donor-funded development programmes.** Prof Quan’s research on tenure rights, assessment of tenure security programmes in Africa, and land projects in Mozambique, was disseminated at the World Bank annual Land Conferences (2013–14, 2016, 2018), and the Land Policy Forum hosted by the Overseas Development Institute (2015–19), influencing land professionals and practitioners directly. Prof Quan disseminated research (2017, 2019) on recognition of land rights to private investors and development finance institutions at Food Security Week at FAO, via webinars with DFID, the OECD Centre for Responsible Business and agribusiness companies. In 2019–20 he developed an online information resource including results and key lessons from a set of responsible private investment pilot projects to which he provided technical oversight and guidance (2016–19). This also included tools, and case studies of practical approaches that companies and civil society can use: landportal.org.



Aerial view of a sugar plantation | Photo: kindly shared by Illovo Sugar

- **NRI research and international engagement (2014–15) supported the development and inclusion of Indicator 1.4.2 to measure global progress in securing land rights in the SDG monitoring framework under Goal 1, Ending Poverty.** The research demonstrated feasible methodologies for data collection and reporting, leading to uprating the indicator’s priority status in 2017 and contributed to renewed monitoring efforts at country level.
- **NRI researchers provided technical support to UN-Habitat** in its engagement with the UN Statistical Commission (UNSC). NRI research (2016) helped UN-Habitat develop and demonstrate feasible methodologies for data collection and analysis, including combining administrative and survey data, and integrating specialised ‘land modules’ into planned household surveys. Assoc Prof Kumar and Prof Quan compiled a sourcebook for UN-Habitat, providing practical resources for use at country level and for training with national statistical agencies. In 2017, they supported UN-Habitat to draft a meta-data statement for Indicator 1.4.2; findings were used in advocacy for governments to prioritise reporting on Indicator 1.4.2 by the Global Donor Working Group on Land and by civil society and multilateral agencies in the UN-Habitat Coordinated Global Land Indicators Initiative.
- **NRI research assisted in early-stage development and launch of [PRIndex](#), a global index of perceived security of land and property rights.** By end 2019, this had enabled estimation of perceived tenure insecurity in 107 countries (on average one in four people feel their land or property rights are insecure), helping to track progress against Indicator 1.4.2, facilitate lessons learned, and promote remediation. PRIndex enables systematic monitoring and cross-country comparisons by national governments, international organisations, municipal leaders, and land professionals.
- **Engagement with NRI’s research by key international agencies and organisations concerned with land is reflected in:** international soft-law instruments, the Voluntary Guidelines on the Governance of Tenure (Committee on World Food Security & FAO, 2015) and Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change Special Report on Climate Change and Land (2019).

Our Partners

- Department for International Development (DFID—now part of Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office)
- UN Habitat
- The International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED)
- Land Portal

Key publications

Toulmin, Camilla and **Quan, Julian** (eds.) (2000) [Evolving land rights, policy and tenure in Africa](#). DFID/IIED/NRI, London, UK. ISBN 1899825517.

Ubink, Janine M. and **Quan, Julian F.** (2008) How to combine tradition and modernity? Regulating customary land management in Ghana. *Land Use Policy*, 25 (2). pp. 198-213. ISSN 0264-8377. DOI: [10.1016/j.landusepol.2007.06.002](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.landusepol.2007.06.002)

Quan, J., Ubink, J., and Antwi, A. (2008) Risks and opportunities of state intervention in customary land management: Emergent findings from the Land Administration Project Ghana. In: Ubink, Janine M. and Amanor, Kojo S., (eds.) [Contesting Land and Custom in Ghana: State, Chief and the Citizen](#). Leiden University Press, Leiden, the Netherlands, pp. 183-208. ISBN 9087280475.

Kumar, R., **Quan, J.** and Mboup, G. (2018) [A Multi-Country Capacity Assessment of National Statistical Offices Preparedness to Report on SDG Indicator 1.4.2](#)

Contact: [Prof Julian Quan](#) | [Email](#)