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Measuring Land Rights for a Sustainable Future

September 22, 2015

By Kaitlin Y. Cordes and Jeffrey D. Sachs | September 22, 2015

Land rights, both for individuals and for communities, are critical for achieving sustainable development. Security of land tenure and other rights to the land (sometimes held communally rather than individually) [can accelerate](#) poverty reduction, strengthen food security, and empower women. Land rights can reduce resource conflicts, as well as encourage the responsible use of natural resources. As the UN member countries begin to implement the new Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), they should keep land rights in their focus, and measure and protect land rights in order to achieve the SDGs.

Early next year, the UN will adopt specific indicators to assess progress in achieving the SDGs. One such indicator should measure land rights, especially within poor or marginalized communities. The current list of priority indicators proposed by the UN Inter-agency and Expert Group on Sustainable Development Goal Indicators (IAEG) so far fails to include an appropriate land-rights indicator. Although SDG Target 1.4 aims in part to “ensure that all men and women, in particular the poor and the vulnerable, have equal rights to economic resources, as well as access to ... ownership and control over land and other forms of property, inheritance, [and] natural resources,” the IAEG’s [current suggested indicator](#) only measures a very narrow aspect of that target: the share of women among agricultural land owners. We can do better than that, by adopting a measure of land rights that truly tracks the security of poor people in their land and in other productive resources necessary for livelihoods and survival.

A more appropriate indicator has been proposed and should be adopted by the UN, recognizing that with experience the measure will be improved over time. The indicator [would assess](#) the “[p]ercentage of women, men, indigenous peoples, and local communities (IPLCs) with secure rights to land, property, and natural resources, measured by (a) percentage with legally documented or recognized evidence of tenure, and (b) percentage who perceive their rights are recognized and protected.” It would track both individual and communal rights (such as the

rights of indigenous populations to their traditional lands). Such an indicator would be very well suited to the goals and targets of the SDGs.

This new land-rights indicator has achieved a high level of consensus: it has been [endorsed](#) by 30 civil society organizations, [supported](#) by a network of development partners, [suggested](#) by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), and [recommended](#) by the Sustainable Development Solutions Network. The indicator, in turn, draws on lengthy work undertaken by the [Global Land Indicators Initiative](#) (GLII), which has brought together more than 30 organizations to develop effective ways to measure secure access to land.

The elements of this consensus indicator are important for several reasons. As opposed to the indicator now proposed by the IAEG, the specific land-rights indicator would directly measure the land rights of women and men, as well as indigenous peoples and local communities. By not limiting its focus to women only, the indicator would enable measurements of land rights generally, while also emphasizing groups with particularly precarious rights or facing frequent abuse of those rights.

The indicator would also cover a range of land, property, and natural resources, rather than simply agricultural land. This would ensure that proper attention is paid to other land and resources that are significant for supporting livelihoods and reducing poverty, such as urban property, rural commons land, or forest resources. Moreover, this indicator focuses on “secure rights” rather than ownership, which is more appropriate as a global approach. Ownership is just one type of right to land; in many places, it is simply not a suitable standard against which to measure rights to access, use, or otherwise control land. This is particularly so for indigenous peoples, who may have customary rights to land that are protected by domestic and international law, even without formal individual ownership of the land under domestic law.

While legal recognition of tenure ([i.e., rights over land](#)) is critical, an overemphasis on legal documentation can, in some situations, be problematic; for example, some [titling](#) programs have entrenched inequalities rather than reduced them. Additionally, legal documents are not always sufficient to gauge how secure land rights are. Measuring perceptions of rights protections, as this proposed indicator does, thus provides useful supplemental information. For this reason, and given the differences in how tenure is documented around the world, perception measurements of security of land rights would also help in comparisons across countries.

The proposed consensus indicator lays out a feasible way of measuring land rights progress in the pursuit of sustainable development. The indicator is also aspirational. In a world with a growing interest in rural land acquisitions by large-scale commercial interests, sometimes little more than corrupt land grabs, efforts to measure and monitor the land rights of marginalized communities would help to encourage safeguards for some of the most vulnerable people and places around the globe. The inclusion of an appropriate land-rights indicator in the SDG framework would thereby help to ensure that social inclusion and environmental protection are truly made part of our new age of sustainable development.

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