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**ISF Women, Peace and Security Helpdesk**

# Women's Land Tenure Security and Conflict Resilience in FCAS

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## Executive Summary - Women's Land Tenure Security and Conflict Resilience in FCAS

**When women have secure rights to land communities in Fragile and Conflict-Affected Settings (FCAS) become more stable, more resilient to climate impacts and better able to grow economically.** Evidence across selected FCAS regions shows that **secure land rights for women strengthen the systems through which conflict resilience is built**, from agricultural productivity and food security, to governance participation, institutional trust, climate resilience and durable solutions. **Where Women's Land Tenure Security (WLTS) is weak, fragility deepens, displacement becomes protracted and conflict reoccurs.**

Emerging evidence demonstrates that **WLTS interventions are feasible in high-risk environments and actively support the structural conditions associated with reduced vulnerability to conflict and climate shocks.** While gender-disaggregated data remains limited, documented programme learnings and outcomes indicates that **women's tenure security can be strengthened in FCAS to deliver resilience across the humanitarian–development–peace nexus.** Land rights matter for women and men, and for groups facing structural marginalisation, including Indigenous Peoples and Afro-descendant communities. This review focuses on WLTS, as evidence shows women face higher tenure insecurity and with distinct impacts.



### Why WLTS Matters in FCAS

**WLTS matters for trust in land institutions and fair dispute resolution.** When women have secure land rights, they can participate in land governance and dispute-resolution processes. Inclusive land governance processes support more balanced decisions and strengthen community confidence in local institutions, easing grievances that can drive tension.

**WLTS also contributes to return and post-conflict recovery.** Secure rights give women the standing to reclaim land and restart livelihoods following return. Where land tenure is insecure, women face higher risks of eviction and exclusion because their claims are informal, undocumented or mediated through male relatives.

**WLTS reduces exposure to Gender Based Violence and harmful coping strategies.** Secure land rights strengthen women's economic position and bargaining power, enabling safer choices and reducing dependence on violent or high-risk relationships. Losing land removes women's main source of economic security and can increase exposure to violence, HIV/AIDS and harmful coping strategies such as transactional sex or early marriage.

**WLTS shapes food security outcomes.** Women in FCAS shoulder primary responsibility for feeding households, yet hold the least secure rights to the land they farm and face heightened vulnerability during displacement, including exclusion from dispute-resolution systems. WLTS gives women the confidence to invest labour in food production and make decisions on crops, inputs and technologies that improve food availability, consumption and dietary quality.

**WLTS strengthens climate adaptation.** Secure tenure gives women the incentive to invest in sustainable long-term land management practices and adopt response options that improve resilience to climate shocks. Insecure tenure weakens these incentives and can increase vulnerability to climate risks.

**WLTS is also a lever for reducing conflict risks.** Land disputes are among the most common triggers of local violence in FCAS. When women's claims are not recognised during displacement or return, disputes can escalate and become politicised. Secure tenure lowers contestation, clarifies rights and contributes to earlier resolution through formal and customary systems.

### Case study – Iraq

UN-Habitat used the low-cost Social Tenure Domain Model (STDM) in post-ISIS Sinjar, Iraq, to quickly document land rights based on community-verified claims rather than formal land records. This approach recognised informal and overlapping rights, issued occupancy certificates that included all household members, and removed barriers that typically exclude women from land restitution. The certificates strengthened tenure security, for women in particular, reduced disputes, supported safe and voluntary return, and rebuilt trust in local authorities. The Iraqi government later accepted these certificates as legally valid and requested national scale-up, demonstrating STDM's value in stabilisation and conflict-affected contexts. (Source: **UN-Habitat, Land and Conflict, 2018**).<sup>1</sup>

### **Effective Approaches for Embedding WLTS into Conflict Resilience**

- **Treat WLTS as a resilience and recovery issue.** In FCAS, land is not a technical issue but a source of identity, livelihood, authority and a site of conflict. Insecure land rights for women contribute to prolonged displacement, weaker recovery and local grievance in FCAS. WLTS should therefore be positioned as a stability, protection and resilience investment rather than a niche thematic issue.
- **Integrate WLTS across humanitarian, climate, food security, governance and peacebuilding programming.** Evidence indicates that outcomes are stronger where legal support, livelihoods, governance reform and social norm change are addressed together rather than through isolated interventions.
- **Embed early women's rights to Housing, Land and Property (HLP) support into humanitarian response and durable solutions programming.** Early action on documentation, dispute resolution and protection against secondary occupation can reduce dispossession risks and support safer return and recovery. Sequencing matters, and protection and legitimacy must come before formalisation.
- **Move beyond generic gender mainstreaming approaches.** Women in FCAS face heightened tenure insecurity, exclusion from decision-making and heavy recovery burdens. Effective WLTS practice requires dedicated expertise, targeted resources and practical support to help women navigate claims, documentation and disputes in systems that are often inaccessible or contested.
- **Engage with customary systems alongside formal institutions.** Land governance in FCAS is plural. Courts, chiefs, elders, women's groups and local authorities all shape outcomes. Sustainable progress depends on engaging these actors, ensuring women's meaningful participation in dispute resolution and supporting norm change over time, while avoiding the entrenchment of exclusionary gatekeepers.
- **Support gender-transformative, conflict-sensitive land governance and registration systems.** Formalisation can reduce harm but can also entrench exclusion. WLTS systems must recognise overlapping, shared and secondary rights, and avoid rigid boundary-making where mobility, seasonal access or collective use underpin resilience.
- **Treat WLTS as a programme risk and value-for-money consideration.** Insecure tenure can increase exposure to eviction, asset loss, repeated displacement and programme disruption across humanitarian, climate and livelihoods investments. Strengthening WLTS reduces downstream costs and supports the resilience of FCDO portfolios.
- **Use existing FCDO policy and investment levers rather than creating standalone WLTS programmes.** WLTS aligns with current shifts toward systems support, local leadership, resilience and responsible investment. Opportunities for integration already exist across Women and Girls, WPS, climate, humanitarian, governance and responsible investment portfolios.

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## List of Acronyms

|            |                                                                             |
|------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| ADR        | Alternative Dispute Resolution                                              |
| CFUGs      | Community Forest User Groups                                                |
| CSA        | Climate Smart Agriculture                                                   |
| DUAT       | Direito de Uso e Aproveitamento da Terra                                    |
| FAO        | The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO)                                 |
| FCAS       | Fragile and Conflict Affected Settings                                      |
| FCDO       | Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office                                  |
| GBV        | Gender Based Violence                                                       |
| HDP        | Humanitarian, Development and Peace                                         |
| HIV/AIDS   | Human Immunodeficiency Virus/Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (HIV/AIDS). |
| HLP        | Housing, Land and Property                                                  |
| ILRG       | Integrated Land and Resource Governance                                     |
| OECD       | Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development                      |
| STDM       | Social Tenure Domain Model                                                  |
| ToC        | Theory of Change                                                            |
| UN-Habitat | United Nations Human Settlements Programme                                  |
| USAID      | United States Agency for International Development                          |
| WLTS       | Women Land Tenure Security                                                  |
| WPS        | Women, Peace and Security                                                   |
| WRLFs      | Women's Rights and Leadership Forums (WRLFs),                               |

## 1.0 Introduction

In fragile and conflict-affected settings, land is not just a productive asset. It is a core institution that shapes power, security and recovery. Control over land determines who can access livelihoods, who can return after displacement, and whose claims are recognised or denied.<sup>1</sup> Where land governance is weak or contested, disputes interact with displacement, climate stress and economic pressure to drive instability.<sup>2</sup>

These dynamics are highly gendered. Women's land rights are more likely to be informal, undocumented or dependent on male relatives, and are therefore more easily lost during conflict.<sup>3</sup> Documentation is destroyed, family structures are disrupted, and customary protections weaken. On return following conflict or climate related displacement, many women find their land occupied or their claims contested, leaving them unable to reclaim assets or rebuild livelihoods.<sup>4</sup> Girls also face a distinct form of tenure insecurity. Patrilineal inheritance norms exclude them from future claims, and conflict dismantles the social and evidentiary foundations of those claims before adulthood.<sup>5,6</sup> Institutional weaknesses reinforce these outcomes. Land governance systems, both formal and customary, are often male-dominated and poorly aligned;<sup>7</sup> and family, inheritance, and land rights laws are inconsistent in many FCAS contexts.<sup>8</sup> Women face barriers to ownership, inheritance and dispute resolution, and the gap between legal rights and lived reality remains wide. In practice, this means that even where rights exist in law, they are often not enforceable.<sup>9</sup>

These vulnerabilities centre on Women's Land Tenure Security (WLTS) as a foundational enabler of resilience and stability. WLTS enables livelihood recovery by allowing women to re-establish agricultural production, increase productivity and sustain household food security, nutrition and dietary diversity.<sup>10</sup> WLTS also contributes to climate adaptation, with more likely to invest in soil conservation, climate-smart agriculture and natural resource management when they believe they can retain the benefits.<sup>11</sup> Strengthening WLTS also generates wider social gains, increasing women's bargaining and decision-making power within households and communities<sup>12</sup> and reducing gender-based violence.<sup>13</sup> During displacement, secure access to Housing, Land and Property (HLP) reduces exposure to violence, exploitation and forced eviction, and is central to durable solution.<sup>14</sup> Women's insecure land tenure has direct implications for resilience. Without secure land rights, women are unable to re-establish production, invest in land, or sustain household food security. Displacement becomes prolonged where return is not viable.<sup>15</sup> Exposure to violence and exploitation increases as women lose economic independence.<sup>16</sup>

The effects of insecure land tenure, specifically WLTS, cut across FCDO's core priorities. As will be explored through the analysis of this report: without WLTS humanitarian programmes are more exposed to eviction and repeated displacement, especially among widows, divorcees and female-headed households, who are often less able to demonstrate recognised claims needed to secure land, shelter, services and early recovery assets.<sup>17</sup> This can disrupt durable return and slow progress towards recovery. Livelihoods and food security investments are likely to underdeliver where women have insecure access to land, reducing incentives to adopt improved inputs, diversify production or maintain gains. Climate programmes risk underperforming when women lack confidence that they will secure the long-term benefits of restoration or adaptation measures, limiting uptake of soil, water and land management practices that underpin resilience. Governance outcomes are harder to sustain when exclusionary land governance systems limit women's participation and when dispute systems leave cases unresolved or resolved in ways that lack legitimacy, predictability and trust.<sup>18</sup> In FCAS, unresolved disputes can leave grievances unaddressed in ways that can contribute to wider tensions.

Protection and health programmes are equally affected as insecure land tenure heightens exposure to Gender Based Violence (GBV) and harmful coping strategies.<sup>19</sup> When women lose their only viable livelihood source, the likelihood of women turning to transactional sex increases, increasing exposure to Human Immunodeficiency Virus/Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (HIV/AIDS). Education programmes are similarly affected, as economic hardship can push parents to marry off girls early and withdraw them from school, undermining attendance and retention.<sup>20</sup> Most FCDO programmes rely on land for delivery, and insecure tenure creates material risks of underperformance and programme-site eviction, which undermine sustainability and value for money.<sup>21</sup> Despite its centrality to resilience and recovery, WLTS continues to be marginal in FCAS programming. Gender is routinely referenced, yet WLTS is rarely treated as foundational. Generic gender mainstreaming without targeted support or dedicated budgets masks women's lived and intersectional constraints. This report examines how this

gap persists across the humanitarian–development–peace nexus, where HLP continues to be treated as a downstream development issue rather than a central determinant of stability. It assesses the evidence base and emerging best practice on WLTS and its to conflict resilience and climate response, and considers how addressing WLTS more effectively could strengthen the impact, value for money and durability of FCDO investments in FCAS.

The report is organised into 8 sections. Section 2 sets out the theory of change and the three interconnected pathways that anchor the analysis. Section 3 reviews the evidence base. Section 4 examines the programming landscape and approaches used to strengthen WLTS in FCAS, including emerging best practice. Section 5 assesses the impact of inaction. Section 6 synthesises the implications for resilience and stability, Section 7 presents the recommendations, and Section 8 concludes.

## **1.2. Purpose**

This review was commissioned by FCDO in March 2026 to examine the role of WLTS in strengthening conflict resilience in FCAS. Its purpose is to provide a consolidated, policy-relevant evidence review of how WLTS functions as a structural determinant of resilience, assess the strength of the available evidence and identify implications for FCDO programming.

## **1.3. Methodology and Evidence Base**

The review draws on a rapid, structured synthesis of academic research, grey literature from International Non-Governmental Organisations (INGOs), intergovernmental organisations and multilateral institutions, and local and national civil society organisations. It also incorporates United Kingdom (UK) policy documents, institutional reports and independent programme evaluations, with evidence from FCAS prioritised throughout. The review covers programmes delivered between 2014 and 2026 by the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat), the World Bank, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), UN Women, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), the International Land Coalition (ILC), Tetra Tech, Landesa, and Namati, among others. Evidence is synthesised from multiple FCAS regions, including Ethiopia, Rwanda, DRC, South Sudan, Sudan, Somalia, Liberia, the Central African Republic, Sierra Leone, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Colombia. Illustrative examples are used to demonstrate operational patterns relevant to FCDO decision-making and policy.

In several cases, evidence on Housing, Land and Property (HLP) rights is not gender-disaggregated. When reviewed alongside data on women's roles in land use, resource management and decision making and triangulated with programme learnings and evaluations, it highlights the particular importance of WLTS for food security, climate adaptation, return and wider recovery, governance and conflict resilience. The review applies an evidence confidence framework, making explicit where the evidence is strong, emerging, or absent. See further details of evidence selection and methodology in Annex 1.

## 2.0 Theory of Change and Analytical Framework

This section introduces the Theory of Change (ToC) that underpins the analysis of how WLST contributes to conflict resilience in FCAS. It presents the core causal logic and the three integrated pathways through which WLTS shapes resilience outcomes: economic resilience, governance and institutional legitimacy, and conflict prevention and mitigation.

### 2.1 Theory of Change

The ToC begins from the higher-level goal of strengthening conflict resilience in FCAS. The model is explicitly conditional: IF women's rights are legally recognised, socially upheld and institutionally enforced, AND cross-cutting constraints are addressed, THEN WLTS strengthens the economic, governance and dispute-resolution systems that contribute to conflict resilience. Together, they generate the three outcomes that structure the ToC: economic resilience, governance legitimacy and conflict-mitigation effects. These systems operate alongside wider political, security and social systems beyond the scope of WLTS. These outcomes form the basis of the three analytical pathways described below. These pathways are not sequential or linear. They operate simultaneously and interactively, and are best understood as distinct but interconnected mechanisms through which tenure security shapes resilience outcomes. Strengthening WLTS operates through Pathway 1: Economic Resilience; Pathway 2: Governance and Institutional Legitimacy; and Pathway 3: Conflict Mitigation and Prevention.

Under Pathway 1 (Economic Resilience), the hypothesis is that IF women hold secure land rights, THEN they have a rational incentive to invest in land, adopt climate-smart practices, diversify livelihoods and accumulate assets, THEREFORE increasing household food security, productivity and shock-absorption capacity. These economic effects also have spill over implications for the other pathways: stronger livelihood security reduces the likelihood that households mobilise or escalate resource-related grievances, and enables more meaningful participation in local governance processes. Conversely, where tenure is insecure, suppressed investment and heightened vulnerability can intensify competition over land and reinforce exclusion from decision-making spaces. This pathway breaks when displacement destroys documentation and land access; when climate stress repeatedly wipes out productivity gains; when market pressures intensify contestation; or when insecurity and GBV risks restrict women's mobility and access to markets; or when women lack access to the finance, technology and extension services needed to invest in land and adopt climate-smart practices. In these cases, even secure rights may not translate into investment or resilience.

Under Pathway 2 (Governance and Institutional Legitimacy), the hypothesis is that IF land governance systems are inclusive, accessible and capable of fairly resolving women's land claims, THEN women's participation in community decision-making increases, institutional trust strengthens and grievance accumulation declines, THEREFORE enhancing governance legitimacy and reducing fragility risks. These governance effects are intricately linked to the other pathways: legitimate and accessible institutions are necessary for resolving land disputes (Pathway 3) and for enabling women to realise the economic benefits of tenure security (Pathway 1). Where women are excluded or unable to realise their rights in practice, governance systems risk reinforcing inequality, weakening legitimacy, and amplifying both economic vulnerability and conflict risk. This pathway breaks when legal pluralism produces contradictory rules; when elite capture distorts allocation and dispute resolution; when discriminatory norms and social sanctions deter women from participating; or when administrative capacity is too weak to enforce decisions. In these conditions, rights may exist on paper but may not be exercised in practice, and governance legitimacy erodes.

Under Pathway 3 (Conflict Mitigation and Prevention), the hypothesis is that IF women's tenure rights are secure and disputes are resolved fairly and safely, THEN exposure to land-related conflict is likely to decline, unresolved grievances can be reduced, and women can participate effectively in early warning, mediation and peacebuilding, THEREFORE contributing to a lower risk of conflict recurrence and a more durable post-conflict order. Outcomes in this pathway depend on the other two. Without functioning and legitimate institutions (Pathway 2), disputes are unlikely to be resolved fairly. Without a degree of economic stability (Pathway 1), underlying pressures such as resource competition persist. This pathway breaks when displacement and forced return generate overlapping claims; when legal pluralism and weak institutions prevent enforcement; when GBV risks make dispute forums unsafe for women to access or participate in; or when security conditions prevent women from accessing justice. In these contexts, unresolved grievances accumulate and seed the next cycle of conflict.

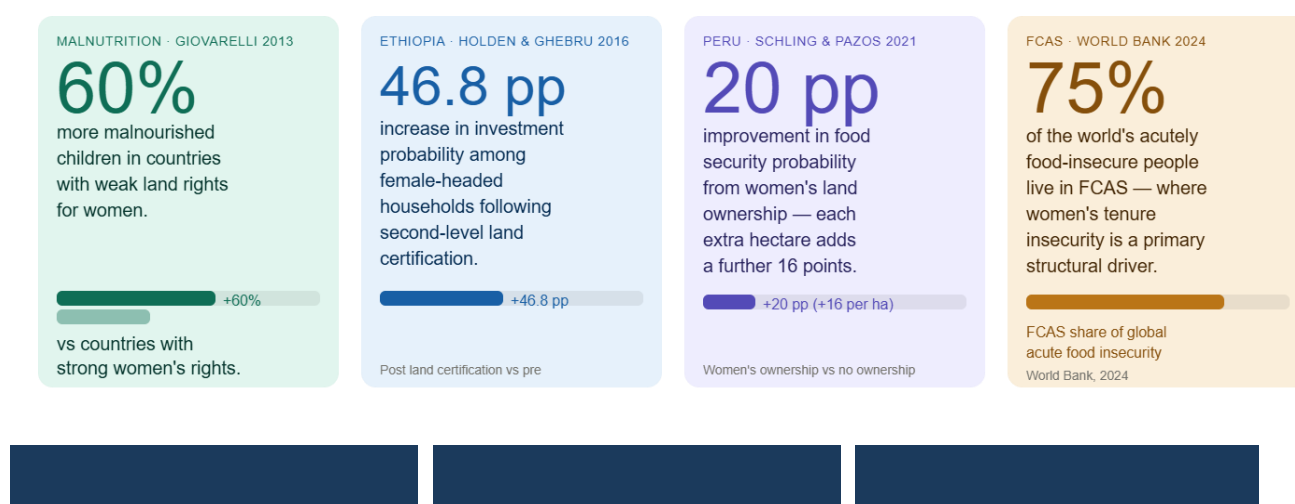
### 3.0. The Evidence

This section presents the findings from the evidence review undertaken that explores how WLTS strengthens resilience in FCAS through three interconnected pathways: economic resilience, governance and institutional legitimacy, and conflict prevention and mitigation. The first pathway illustrates how secure land rights enable women to increase agricultural productivity, strengthen food security, build absorptive capacity, and adopt climate-adaptive practices. The second examines how WLTS shapes participation and how exclusionary formalisation affects governance legitimacy. The third shows how secure rights reduce land-related disputes, lower exposure to GBV, support durable return and restitution processes, strengthen dispute resolution, and enable women's participation in peace and recovery processes. Together, these pathways demonstrate that WLTS reinforces the systems through which conflict resilience is built in FCAS.

#### 3.1 Pathway 1: Economic Resilience

The pathway examines how WLTS shapes economic resilience in FCAS. WLTS influences household and livelihood stability through four core mechanisms: agricultural investment and productivity, household food security, the capacity to absorb economic shocks and climate-resilient land management. These mechanisms structure the analysis that follows and set out the channels through which economic resilience is strengthened.

#### Key data



##### 3.1.1 Mechanism 1: Agricultural Investment and Productivity

In FCAS, women supply much of the agricultural labour yet hold the least secure rights to the land they cultivate.<sup>22</sup> Conflict deepens this insecurity as household structures shift, legal claims weaken, and discriminatory norms tighten, suppressing investment.<sup>23</sup> Secure land rights are a critical driver of agricultural investment. **When women's land tenure is secure, evidence suggests that they invest more labour, capital, time, and other productive resources, adopt soil and water conservation practices, diversify crops, and make production decisions that raise yields.**<sup>24</sup>

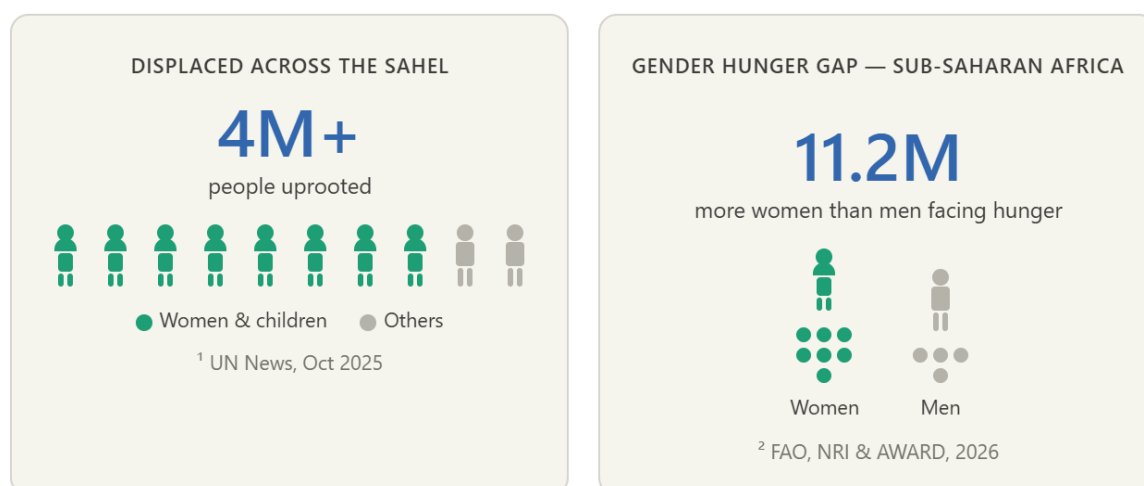
Ethiopia provides some of the clearest data. A study by Holden and Mannberg shows that land certification increases productivity, with the largest gains among female-headed households.<sup>25</sup> As fear of redistribution or land grabbing declines due to perceived tenure security, households undertake both short- and long-term investments. A follow-up study eight years after second-level certification found increased planting of perennials, and that joint spousal certification raised investment by 46.8 percentage points.<sup>26</sup> An early impact evaluation of Benin's first large-scale randomised-controlled trial of a land formalisation programme by Goldstein et al. found that the intervention generated long-term land investments and produced an exogenous increase in women's tenure security. Similar results are documented in Malawi and Rwanda, where secure rights increased agricultural investment, uptake of soil conservation and adoption of cash crops, with the strongest gains among women holding joint rights.<sup>27</sup> Women reported greater confidence in cultivating their plots because their inheritance, ownership

and use rights were secured through the land tenure regularisation processes.<sup>28</sup> Landesa's MCC-funded programmes in Benin, Lesotho, Mali and Namibia found that female-managed plots with land certificates were more likely to be left fallow, a practice essential for restoring soil fertility and sustaining agricultural productivity.<sup>29</sup> Evidence from Kenya shows that women with land titles achieve substantially higher maize yields than women without titles (9.02 kg/acre compared with 3.78 kg/acre), and they also outperform men farming without titles (4.97 kg/acre).<sup>30</sup> However, they do not outperform men who also hold titles, whose yields remain the highest at 11.40 kg/acre. The study attributes the discrepancies to differences in tenure security and access to complementary inputs. Women with titles invest more and therefore outperform women without titles and men without titles. However, men with titles retain structural advantages—larger plots, better road access and higher input use—which explains why women with titles do not outperform men who also hold titles. Secure rights also enable women to participate in rental markets, consolidating plots and adopting higher-return practices such as in Ethiopia, Rwanda and India.<sup>31</sup>

Where women's rights are insecure, investment and productivity can collapse because the risk of dispossession is high. In Uganda, women avoided leaving plots fallow for fear that a season of non-use would jeopardise access, overworking land to signal continuous use.<sup>32</sup> Productivity and income declined when women had to fight to retain control of their plots. Similar patterns are documented in Mozambique, where exclusionary norms limited women's ability to invest in long-term agricultural practices,<sup>33</sup> and in Somalia, where patriarchal norms restricted women's access to land, especially for divorced and widowed women.<sup>34</sup> In fragile environments with weak markets, limited access to finance and recurrent shocks, WLTS provides stability. It is a core resilience measure that shapes productivity, investment and the capacity of households to withstand and recover from crisis.

Despite its importance to agricultural productivity, agricultural policies rarely consider women's tenure security in their design, implementation or evaluation. Intervention that alters the productivity or value of land has implications for tenure security. According to Doss and Meinzen-Dick, programmes that provide inputs such as seed and fertiliser subsidies, extension or advisory services can raise productivity and increase demand for land.<sup>35</sup> Without explicit attention to gender, such interventions may disadvantage women twice: if they are not active participants, gender gaps in productivity may widen, and as land values rise, women's already fragile tenure security may weaken further. Because access to information determines who can benefit from these productivity gains, a six-country study by the World Bank shows that women have far less access to training and advice tailored to their needs.<sup>36</sup> When not recognised as household heads, they receive second-hand information, and household responsibilities, mobility constraints and norms limiting interaction with male extension agents further reduce participation. The study established that in Ethiopia and Uganda for example, women benefit less than men from extension advice, indicating that current systems remain better aligned with male farmers' needs and tenure conditions.<sup>37</sup> In Sierra Leone, low levels of educational attainment limit women's access to agricultural training, reducing their capacity to network, negotiate resources and engage effectively with agricultural development partners and extension agents.<sup>38</sup> These patterns show the importance of considering gender and WLTS in agricultural programming.

### 3.1.2 Mechanism 2: Food Security



As in more stable contexts, women's access to agricultural land in FCAS underpins household food production. Yet across sub-Saharan Africa, which includes many FCAS countries, women in agricultural households are less likely than men to own land or hold secure rights.<sup>39</sup> In 28 of the 32 countries with SDG 5.a.1 data, a larger proportion of men report ownership or secure rights over agricultural land, and in more than 40 percent of these countries the gender gap exceeds 20 percentage points, with stark inequalities in Mali (42 percentage points), Benin (42), Côte d'Ivoire (53) and Niger (57).<sup>40</sup> **These disparities carry greater consequences in FCAS, where women shoulder primary responsibility for feeding households but face dispossession, exclusion from dispute-resolution systems and heightened vulnerability during displacement, making secure tenure essential for stable food production and household food security.** Strengthening women's land rights is therefore likely to increase their ability to exercise control over the land they farm, including decisions on crops, inputs and technologies that improve food availability and dietary quality.<sup>41</sup>

A growing body of evidence links women's land tenure security to improved food security outcomes. A review by Meinzen-Dick et al finds that, despite variation in breadth and methodological rigour, there is strong consensus among development practitioners that strengthening women's land rights is associated with improved resilience, stronger decision-making and better food security outcomes for women, families and children. A study in Rwanda found that women are more likely than men to make farm-level decisions that prioritise household food and nutrition needs, and strengthening their tenure security is therefore expected to increase their decision-making power in ways that support improved food security.<sup>42</sup> In Nigeria, a national cross-sectional study found that women's tenure security increased household food security and dietary diversity, with the strongest effects in rural and conflict-affected regions.<sup>43</sup> Country evidence from Ghana, Nicaragua, Honduras, Ethiopia, Côte d'Ivoire, Bangladesh, and Niger shows that when women have recognised and stable land rights, they gain greater control over productive resources, can diversify crops, and influence decisions on inputs and technologies, leading to improved food availability and more diverse, nutritious diets.<sup>44</sup> Emerging evidence also shows a positive effect of WLTS on child nutrition and well-being. In Vietnam, children in women-owned land households are up to 10 per cent less likely to be ill, and in Nepal they are less likely to be severely underweight.<sup>45</sup>

Where women's rights are insecure, food insecurity deepens. Insecure tenure constrain women's ability to cultivate and invest in land,<sup>46</sup> reducing food availability and increasing household vulnerability as shown in Burkina Faso, Senegal, Uganda, Zimbabwe and South Sudan.<sup>47</sup> The World Food Programme reports that of the 318 million extremely hungry people, nearly 60 per cent are women and girls, and in two-thirds of countries, women are more likely than men to report food insecurity.<sup>48</sup> FAO finds that sub-Saharan Africa has the highest global food insecurity, with a gender gap leaving 11.2 million more women than men experiencing moderate or severe food insecurity in 2024.<sup>49</sup> In contexts of conflict and hunger, women eat last and least, contributing to global anaemia rates in which one in three women is affected.<sup>50</sup> These patterns are particularly concerning given Uthman's finding that rural women in sub-Saharan Africa are 68 per cent more likely to be malnourished than urban women, and that malnourished mothers face higher risks of maternal mortality and are more likely to give birth to low-birth-weight infants who experience stunted growth.<sup>51</sup>

In FCAS, these pressures intensify through displacement, restricted mobility and the breakdown of local markets, making insecure tenure a driver of food insecurity and a barrier to recovery. According to the United Nations, nearly four million people across the Sahel have been uprooted by a volatile mix of conflict, hunger and climate change, and women and children account for 80 per cent of those displaced.<sup>52</sup> Food insecurity has become a growing driver of flight, with the proportion of displaced people citing hunger as a primary reason for leaving doubling in recent years. The UN describes it as a chronic hunger emergency amidst widening funding gaps. **In this context, secure land rights for women strengthen household food security, reducing the likelihood of food-insecurity-driven onward movement. Lower levels of onward displacement, in turn, reduce exposure to new conflict fronts and ease pressure on already-strained host communities. Strengthening WLTS is therefore essential to improving food availability, stabilising household consumption and lowering the risk of displacement.**

### 3.1.3 Mechanism 3: Economic Shock Absorption

In FCAS, repeated and prolonged shocks make WLTS central to households' ability to absorb economic stress without irreversible losses. While women are not inherently more at risk than men, limited access to land and other constraints make them more sensitive to shocks and less able to adapt, increasing vulnerability.<sup>53</sup> Secure tenure provides a stable asset base that enables women to diversify livelihoods, adopt coping strategies, retain productive assets and smooth consumption during crises. For example, documented rights allow women to keep land in production or lease it out during displacement or illness, generating income without losing their plots. Secure rights also reduce the risk of dispossession when women temporarily step back from cultivation, strengthening their ability to access credit and engage in non-farm activities and expanding the range of viable coping and recovery options.

In Tanzania, women with secure land rights were three times more likely to work off-farm, earned up to 3.8 times more income and were 1.35 times more likely to have individual savings.<sup>54</sup> In Ghana, land titling in peri-urban areas outside Accra, combined with targeted outreach to women, led to a structural shift away from farming. Households reduced agricultural labour and moved from larger sharecropped parcels to smaller purchased parcels. Women benefited most, reallocating time into higher-value off-farm work and earning significantly larger profits. Although evidence linking WLTS to access to credit is still emerging, Ethiopia's Land Investment for Transformation (LIFT) programme shows that documented rights enables rural farmers to collateralise their right of use of the land, which unlocks the main constraint they face to access credit can unlock the main constraint they face in accessing finance. As land certificates became recognised collateral in 2017, the cost of providing finance to women fell by 56 per cent, and by April 2021, women had taken up 7,854 Second-Level Land Certification (SLLC)-linked loans—around 36 per cent of all loans issued.<sup>55</sup> This demonstrates that when women hold secure, documented rights, land becomes recognised collateral that lowers lender risk, reduces the cost of finance and expands women's ability to access credit, enabling them to smooth consumption and protect assets during shocks. Complementary evidence from UN-Habitat shows that WLTS facilitates societies move from humanitarian vulnerability towards recovery and self-reliance.<sup>56</sup>

Where women's tenure is insecure, FCAS experience shows the reverse. In Sudan, female-headed households have far less capacity to use any economic coping strategy, reflecting structural inequalities in property ownership.<sup>57</sup> As absorptive capacity collapses, households turn to negative coping mechanisms, including withdrawing girls from school, early marriage, distress sales and transactional sex,<sup>58,59,60</sup> where lack of women's land tenure security is identified as a contributing factor to these negative coping mechanisms.

**By strengthening women's capacity to withstand and recover from repeated shocks, secure WLTS reinforces household stability and reduces the economic pressures that drive grievance and heighten conflict risks in FCAS.**

#### GBV SPOTLIGHT | When Tenure Loss Destroys the Last Safety Net

When tenure insecurity eliminates women's economic options, it contributes to increased protection consequences. For example, IDMC reported negative coping mechanism inform of survival sex among women and girls in in Burkina Faso IDP camp where lack of WLTS alongside conflict-driven displacement, acute food insecurity and deepening poverty acted as drivers of these actions.

Source: IDMC, *Internal Displacement in Africa*, 2024.<sup>61</sup>

In Afghanistan, women's insecure land tenure significantly contributed to the rise in early and forced marriage after August 2021. When the governance transition dismantled women's already-fragile claims to land, widows and female-headed households lost access to plots they previously cultivated, and male relatives reclaimed land under re-imposed inheritance norms. This collapse in women's independent access to land removed one of the few remaining economic buffers available to households. Under acute economic stress, families with no secure land or productive assets resorted to early and forced marriage to reduce household costs or obtain bride price payments. These are not behavioural choices. They are structural outcomes of tenure loss, economic collapse and gender-discriminatory norms that transmit vulnerability intergenerationally and increase community fragility (Source: *Amnesty International*, 2022)<sup>62</sup>

### 3.1.4 Mechanism 4: Climate Adaptation

Climate change is now a major driver of fragility in FCAS, accelerating displacement through more frequent droughts, floods and shifts in agro-ecological zones that undermine rural livelihoods and intensify competition over land.<sup>63</sup> The World Bank's Groundswell report projects 216 million internal climate migrants by 2050, with the highest concentrations in Sub-Saharan Africa, a region with many FCAS.<sup>64</sup> Although men and women face different patterns of exposure and vulnerability to climate change, women are more affected in FCAS because they are less able to adapt. The IPCC notes that women's limited and insecure land rights heighten their vulnerability to climate impacts by restricting access to resources, adaptation options and decision-making power.<sup>65</sup>

There is strong conceptual and growing empirical evidence that WLTS supports climate action, though evidence remains constrained by gaps in measurement and gender-disaggregated data. Cross-country studies from Nigeria, Malawi, India and Kenya found that women with secure rights were more likely to adopt soil restoration, water harvesting and agroforestry.<sup>66</sup> Academic research also supports this, as Gumucio et al. show that WLTS strengthens women's incentive and ability to pursue long-term land uses while also expanding short-term response options such as livelihood diversification, conservation agriculture and Climate Smart Agriculture (CSA).<sup>67</sup> Evidence from land governance programmes reinforces this pattern: in Rwanda, women with formalised rights were more likely to adopt soil conservation measures, compared to men<sup>68</sup> and in rural Benin, the gender gap in soil-fertility investment disappeared once female-headed households mapped and documented their parcels.<sup>69</sup> These gains are particularly important in FCAS, where climate shocks interact with conflict, displacement and weak institutions, accelerating land degradation and undermining recovery.

Where women's rights are insecure, climate vulnerability deepens. In Nigeria, for example, women adopted CSA practices that increased yields and stabilised welfare, but were unable to sustain them because they lacked secure, long-term rights to the land needed to maintain investments, access inputs, or make independent decisions.<sup>70</sup> Similar patterns appear across other African countries, where insecure tenure and limited control over land undermine women's ability to maintain long-term CSA investments.<sup>71</sup> In FCAS, rapid-onset climate events, contested land governance and the erosion of customary safety nets magnify these constraints, making insecure tenure a direct driver of climate-induced displacement and instability. Strengthening women's land tenure security is therefore a foundational climate-adaptation investment as it contributes to long-term land restoration, protecting climate-finance gains and reducing vulnerability to climate-driven shocks in FCAS.

The four mechanisms identified through the evidence review demonstrate that WLTS is a contributing structural enabler of economic resilience in FCAS, strengthening households' capacity to withstand, adapt to and recover from overlapping shocks. WLTS is an anchor in shaping the conditions under which climate action, livelihood stability, governance gains and protection outcomes can hold, making it a foundational lever rather than a thematic intervention.

### Pathway 1: Economic Resilience Confidence Framework

| Mechanism                              | Key Evidence Signal                                                                                                                               | Confidence |
|----------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------|
| Agricultural investment & productivity | WLTS increases women's agricultural investment and productivity; investment collapses where rights are insecure                                   | Strong     |
| Food security                          | WLTS improves household food security, dietary diversity and child wellbeing (Nigeria; multi-country studies); insecurity deepens hunger in FCAS. | Strong     |
| Economic shock absorption              | WLTS expands livelihood diversification, income and savings                                                                                       | Strong     |
| Climate adaptation                     | WLTS increases adoption of soil conservation, water harvesting and agroforestry; insecurity undermines sustained CSA adoption.                    | Emerging   |

### **3.2. Pathway 2: Governance and Institutional Legitimacy**

Pathway 2 examines how WLTS strengthens governance and institutional legitimacy in FCAS through two mechanisms. The first shows how secure rights enable women to participate in decision-making and leadership roles that enhance the credibility and responsiveness of institutions. The second considers how gender-blind land reforms continue to disadvantage women and weaken trust in systems already under strain.

#### **3.2.1 Mechanism 1: Participation**

In FCAS, weak institutions, fragmented authority and exclusionary norms that restrict women's mobility and voice make WLTS essential to enabling women's participation in governance at household and local levels. Secure rights give women the economic base, social standing and bargaining power needed to enter decision-making spaces dominated by male elders, customary authorities or armed actors. Where tenure is insecure, women often lack the legitimacy and safety to influence household decisions or how resources are allocated, disputes resolved and community priorities set.

Evidence from Rwanda, Ethiopia and Benin shows gains in increasing participation of women in decision making following the strengthening of WLTS. Joint registration in Rwanda increased women's participation in local governance by 17 percentage points,<sup>72</sup> Ethiopia's second-generation certification expanded women's involvement in community meetings and land decisions,<sup>73</sup> and land demarcation in Benin enabled widows to retain land and re-enter community processes at one of the most acute exclusion points immediately after a husband's death, when inheritance disputes, customary norms and family pressure most often strip women of land and voice.<sup>74</sup> Nepal's Community Forest User Groups (CFUGs) further illustrate how access to resource-governance spaces builds confidence and leadership, with mandated 50% representation giving women visibility, training and experience that has enabled many to move into wider community governance and even national politics.<sup>75</sup> These gains align with evidence showing that women's political participation strengthens democratic accountability, reduces corruption and improves institutional responsiveness—factors consistently associated with more secure and stable countries.<sup>76</sup> Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) analysis links higher women's political inclusion to lower state fragility and reduced conflict relapse while the UN analysis shows that peace agreements are significantly more durable when women participate meaningfully.<sup>77</sup>

At household level, WLTS strengthens women's economic independence, bargaining power and agency, with documented gains for welfare and community development.<sup>78</sup> Research by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) finds that WLTS shifts household and community power dynamics by increasing women's influence over how resources are used, managed or invested.<sup>79</sup> Evidence from Colombia shows measurable increases in women's independent decision-making over land use and resources following joint titling.<sup>80</sup> In Tanzania, formalising customary rights under USAID's Land Tenure Assistance programme led to a more than 90 per cent increase in wives' participation in decisions over agricultural income.<sup>81</sup> In FCAS, these shifts matter because local governance institutions rely on broad-based participation to maintain legitimacy where state capacity is limited.

Despite the gains associated with WLTS, formal rights alone do not guarantee meaningful participation. In settings where customary norms privilege male elders, women often self-limit their engagement even when legally entitled to participate. Standard decision-making indicators can also overstate women's independence because choices are still shaped by husbands' preferences or social expectations.<sup>82</sup> Many women report being afraid to speak in front of men, and internalised norms suppress their voice even when rights exist.<sup>83</sup> Academic research by Agarwal notes that although women are primary forest users with substantial ecological knowledge, they rarely raise issues that matter to them and are often dismissed as lacking capacity.<sup>84</sup> Their participation is therefore nominal rather than effective.

In FCAS, these patterns deepen legitimacy deficits, fuel grievance accumulation, and weaken the governance structures needed to prevent local disputes from escalating into wider conflict. This implies that strengthening governance resilience requires securing women's land rights and addressing the social norms that determine whether those rights translate into meaningful participation.

### 3.2.2. Mechanism 2: Gender Transformative Land Reform

In FCAS, displacement, elite capture, exclusionary norms and weak institutions undermine women's claims, making formalisation either a corrective to structural inequalities or a process that entrenches them. When reforms include joint titling, gender-sensitive procedures and recognition of secondary rights, they reduce dispossession risks and strengthen women's position in governance. Ethiopia's second-generation certification and Rwanda's Land Tenure Regularisation Programme demonstrate this. Mandatory joint registration increased women's documentation, reduced inheritance disputes and improved perceived tenure security.<sup>85</sup> These gains matter in FCAS because they demonstrate that gender-responsive formalisation can stabilise tenure and create institutional entry points for women in contexts where legitimacy is contested.

When gender safeguards are absent, formalisation harms women by converting flexible customary rights into rigid legal rights held by men. This is the formalisation trap: reforms that appear neutral strengthen men's claims, embed them in law and make it harder for women to demonstrate prior rights. The World Bank's global review found that gender-blind titling systematically registered land in male household heads' names, erasing women's *de facto* use rights.<sup>86</sup> In Myanmar, Form 10's requirement to identify a single household head meant men dominated documentation;<sup>87</sup> in Mozambique, *Direito de Uso e Aproveitamento da Terra* (DUATs), a legal instrument that grants the right of use and benefit of land, were issued in the name of the household head, which defaulted to men;<sup>88</sup> and in Nepal, despite progressive laws, entrenched norms still resulted in tenanted land being registered primarily to men.<sup>89</sup>

Similar patterns in Uganda and the Philippines show that women are rarely named on documents even when households report joint ownership, leaving them with weaker, more easily contested rights.<sup>90</sup> A narrow focus on title obscures women's derived and secondary claims and undermines their tenure security when formalisation fails to recognise customary or marital rights. Even when couples agree to obtain a joint certificate for tenanted land, women rarely gain real control; their rights exist largely on paper. Across Rwanda, Uganda and Ethiopia, evidence shows that joint titling strengthens women's formal status but rarely shifts decision-making power regarding land use, management or control.<sup>91</sup> A FIG study across Sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America and Asia reveals that while land registration and joint titling improve perceived tenure security in the short term, socio-cultural norms and weak enforcement prevent these gains from becoming transformative, leaving women's rights largely nominal.<sup>92</sup> Evidence from Tete Province in Mozambique shows that when women's customary use is not recognised, formal processes reinforce male-centred claims and exclude women from land compensation, even when they were the primary users.<sup>93</sup>

In FCAS, these harms are amplified. Weak enforcement, displacement and elite capture make it easier for male relatives, customary authorities or armed actors to use formal titles to override women's claims, deepening grievance and eroding trust in state institutions. This is worse than having no formalisation at all: customary systems, however imperfect, at least provide socially recognised use rights. Gender-blind formalisation erases these rights and replaces them with a title held by a male relative, turning informal exclusion into legally sanctioned dispossession. Women lose both land and the ability to contest the loss, and the institutions responsible for the reform lose legitimacy among those most affected.

In settings where women's participation in governance is not culturally normative, gender-responsive formalisation can shift norms when it combines joint titling, gender-sensitive procedures, community-based legal support and engagement with customary leaders, including male leaders and male champions who drive change and advocate for WLTS, the evidence for which will be explored in the following section. Strengthening women's land rights through gender-responsive formalisation is therefore essential for tenure security, grievance prevention and institutional legitimacy in FCAS.

**Pathway 2: Governance and Institutional Legitimacy Confidence Framework**

| Mechanism                         | Key Evidence Signal                                                                                                                                                      | Confidence                                         |
|-----------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------|
| Participation                     | WLTS increases women's participation in local governance and decision-making                                                                                             | Strong                                             |
|                                   | WLTS strengthens women's household-level bargaining power and influence over resource decisions                                                                          | Strong                                             |
|                                   | Participation remains nominal where norms suppress women's voice even when rights exist                                                                                  | Emerging                                           |
| Gender-transformative land reform | Gender-responsive formalisation (joint titling, gender-sensitive procedures) increases women's documentation, reduces disputes and strengthens perceived tenure security | Strong                                             |
|                                   | Gender-blind formalisation systematically registers land to male heads, erasing women's de facto rights                                                                  | Strong                                             |
|                                   | Joint titling improves formal status but rarely shifts control over land use or decision-making                                                                          | Emerging                                           |
|                                   | Weak enforcement, displacement and elite capture in FCAS amplify harms of gender-blind formalisation, deepening grievance and eroding institutional legitimacy.          | Strong<br>(conceptual + FCAS operational evidence) |

**3.3 Conflict Mitigation, Prevention and Peacebuilding**

Pathway 3 demonstrates that WLTS is a central and under-recognised determinant in conflict mitigation and prevention in FCAS. Insecure land rights heighten women's exposure to GBV, limit their ability to return and secure restitution, and weaken their position in dispute-resolution systems. Secure land rights for women, by contrast, contributes to reduced land-related grievances, strengthen fair and legitimate dispute resolution, and provides a practical entry point for lowering conflict risks. The section also demonstrates that women are not passive victims of conflict but active peace and mediation actors whose contributions strengthen the legitimacy and durability of settlement processes. Secure land rights underpin this role by enabling women to participate in community governance, resolve disputes and engage credibly in local peacebuilding.

**3.3.1 Mechanism 1: GBV-WLTS Nexus**

In FCAS, displacement, economic stress, weakened institutions and discriminatory norms heighten women's exposure to violence and reduce their ability to claim protection. While the drivers of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) and other forms of GBV are complex and context specific, emerging evidence shows that when women hold secure rights to access, use, control, benefit from and inherit land and other property—individually or jointly—they gain economic independence and social authority that can reduce their vulnerability to IPV over time.<sup>94</sup> Country evidence from India and Latin America shows that **women who own property in their own name experience significantly lower levels of marital violence**, indicating that secure rights can shift household power dynamics in ways that reduce certain forms of GBV.<sup>95</sup>

However, evidence from Ethiopia, Zambia and Rwanda shows that when women first assert land and property rights, they can face backlash from male relatives and community members. This can involve intimidation, economic abandonment, coercive rental or sharecropping arrangements, manipulation of loans, forged evidence in disputes, denial of inheritance or joint holding rights and exclusion from decision-making. In Zambia, women have reported both physical and psychological violence when requesting to be added to title certificates or when attempting to develop land registered in their name.<sup>96</sup> In some contexts, women formalising or defending their rights have reported sexual exploitation by officials responsible for land administration.<sup>97</sup> Country experience from Kosovo and Rwanda reinforces this pattern. In Rwanda, although the 1999 Succession Law guarantees equal inheritance, women asserting these rights still face intra-family conflict and social sanction, with relatives framing their claims as threats to family unity.<sup>98</sup> Joireman shows that in Kosovo, women and girls are coerced by family members to refuse property and inheritance rights—even in court—and to assign those rights to brothers or other male relatives<sup>99</sup>. While families may claim to act in the perceived interests of the wider household, what is both

striking and unlawful is that local courts affirm refusals that are clearly coerced, including those made by minors. This enables the exclusion of women from inheriting property, despite their clear legal entitlement. **These patterns show how insecure tenure can be exploited through coercion and economic abuse, and how weak enforcement allows GBV to operate as a mechanism for dispossession.**

In FCAS, these dynamics intersect with wider patterns of conflict-related sexual and gender-based violence. Armed actors use rape, threats of rape, forced marriage and sexual slavery to terrorise communities, force displacement and prevent return, as documented in South Sudan, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Sudan.<sup>100</sup> Such violence is used to clear land, block restitution and prevent women from reclaiming or defending rights to which they are entitled.<sup>101</sup> In Sudan for example, armed militias used sexual violence to force communities off their land.<sup>102</sup> During attacks on villages, Janjaweed fighters raped women and girls to create fear, break community resistance and trigger mass flight.<sup>103</sup> Similar trends are reported among Indigenous communities, where sexual violence is used to facilitate the occupation of Indigenous land.<sup>104</sup>

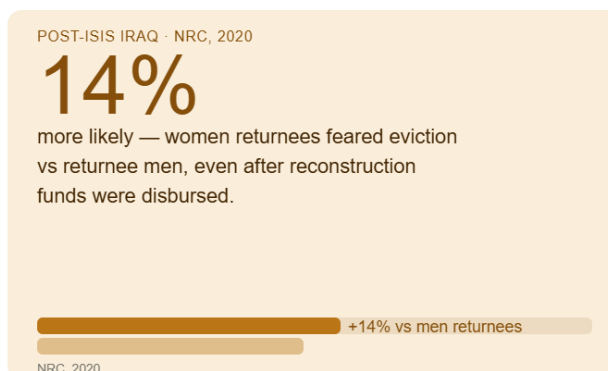
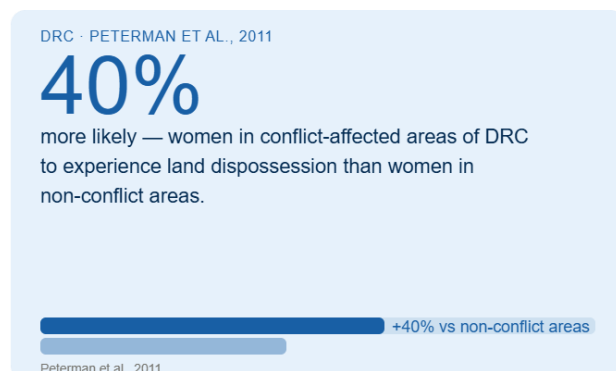
Additionally, emerging evidence links women's secure land rights to a reduction in HIV/AIDS vulnerability. Research from the International Center for Research on Women highlights emerging evidence that women's property ownership and inheritance rights can help break the cycle of HIV and poverty by strengthening economic security, reducing vulnerability to domestic violence and unsafe sex, and improving the capacity of women caring for HIV-affected households to manage the impacts of the disease.<sup>105</sup> In effect, secure housing, land and property rights not only support women living with HIV to cope more effectively, they also reduce the conditions that heighten vulnerability to infection. Empirical evidence from Kenya shows that strengthening women's land and tenure security contributes to the reduction in their risk of HIV infection and lowers behaviours associated with secondary transmission.<sup>106</sup> These effects arise because of secure and enforceable rights increase women's bargaining power and their ability to leave high-risk relationships and to negotiate safer sex practices.

In many FCAS, women continue to depend on men to access and control land and other assets. UN Security Council Resolutions 1325 on Women, Peace and Security and 1308 on HIV and Conflict both underline that women and girls face heightened vulnerability to HIV infection during conflict and in post-conflict transitions. For e Limited economic resources, fear of violence and restrictive norms reduce their ability to refuse sex or negotiate safer practices, increasing HIV risk. In parts of sub-Saharan Africa, discriminatory practices such as wife inheritance further expose widows to coerced sexual relations and dispossession.<sup>107</sup> Where legal protection of land rights is weak, women may be forced from their homes, lose custody of children and be stripped of marital property following a partner's death or disclosure of HIV status. Evidence from Malawi shows that HIV/AIDS can directly undermine women's access to land in customary systems where women hold use rights through male relatives who are the recognised land heirs.<sup>108</sup> When HIV-related stigma or the death of a spouse or male kin severs these relationships, women's claims to land are weakened or lost entirely. This termination of relationship-based access increases tenure insecurity for women in communities where they do not have independent inheritance rights. This is corroborated by a recent study in Zambia and Malawi which shows that HIV/AIDS increases women's land insecurity by triggering inheritance-related dispossession, distress sales of productive assets, and the breakdown of social networks that underpin women's customary access to land.<sup>109</sup>

Overall, the evidence underscores that WLTS contributes to shaping both exposure to GBV and vulnerability to HIV in FCAS. Secure, enforceable rights reduce the economic dependence and relational constraints that trap women in violent or high-risk situations, while insecure or contested rights heighten exposure to coercion, dispossession and conflict-related sexual violence. **WLTS, therefore, emerges not as a standalone solution but as a foundational lever for reducing GBV risks and strengthening women's resilience in FCAS.**

### 3.3.2 Mechanism 2: Return and Restitution

#### Key data



Across FCAS, the destruction of land records, weak land administration and widespread secondary occupation make it difficult for displaced people, especially women, to reclaim land.<sup>110</sup> These gaps create space for land grabbing and fraudulent claims and shape restitution processes in ways that allow discriminatory practices around women's land rights to re-emerge despite gender provisions in peace agreements or law. Secondary occupation is a particularly destabilising barrier to post-conflict return, exposing women to heightened risks of dispossession as land abandoned during displacement is taken over by armed actors, neighbours, male relatives or local authorities.<sup>111</sup> This generates overlapping claims that women are least able to contest. This is critical given that women, including many female-headed households, constitute more than half of displaced populations.<sup>112</sup>

Colombia illustrates how these constraints play out in practice. The 2016 Peace Agreement contains some of the strongest gender provisions to date, including guarantees for women's access to land, joint titling and priority in rural reform, yet implementation has lagged. Many women held land informally through male relations and were left without documentation when violence, displacement or death ruptured families.<sup>113</sup> Widows remain particularly vulnerable, as land is returned to the husband's relatives. UN Women reports that only 36 per cent of rural land titles are held by women, with progress slowed by entrenched norms and administrative bottlenecks.<sup>114</sup> As a result, women continue to face threats from armed groups occupying their land, lack documentation to file claims and encounter local authorities reluctant to enforce gender provisions.<sup>115</sup> The transformative commitments of the Accord remain largely unrealised for displaced, Afro-Colombian, Indigenous and rural women.

Comparable dynamics are evident in Northern Uganda, Burundi and Colombia, where women returning from conflict-related displacement found their land occupied by in-laws, male relatives or neighbours, with parts of their property sold in their absence. In Northern Uganda, secondary occupation became a major source of intra-community conflict, and women were excluded from clan-based dispute mechanisms.<sup>116</sup> Without documentation, many were unable to assert legitimate claims, and several disputes escalated into violence and deaths. In Colombia, discrimination leaves rural women, especially widows who fled amid killings and sexual violence, at a disadvantage when seeking redress, as they lack written proof of tenancy or formal marriage certificates.<sup>117</sup> Evidence from Nigeria, the Central African Republic, Afghanistan, South Sudan, Somalia and Iraq demonstrates that displaced women, including widows, are unable to return to their homes because they fear eviction by male relatives.<sup>118</sup> In these settings, inheritance laws and exclusionary customary practices systematically disadvantage women, restricting their access to land and limiting their ability to reclaim property after conflict.

As UN-Habitat observes, secure land rights, particularly for women, are foundational to socially and economically stable societies and contribute to reduced risks of relapse into conflict.<sup>119</sup> The evidence above shows that WLTS is a practical lever for restitution in FCAS, strengthening women's ability to reclaim property, resolve competing claims and secure more legitimate, durable post-conflict return.

### 3.3.3. Mechanism 3: Dispute Resolution

As in more stable contexts, women in FCAS have limited recourse when land is taken because courts and customary systems are inaccessible, costly, male-dominated or non-functional.<sup>120</sup> Low representation of women within these institutions reinforces bias against women in the handling of land disputes. Across Sub-Saharan Africa, women remain markedly under-represented as judges, magistrates and lawyers. UN Women reports that women constitute only 39 per cent of judges in Mozambique, 22 per cent in Sierra Leone and 18 per cent in Burkina Faso.<sup>121</sup> These imbalances weaken judicial legitimacy and reduce the likelihood of gender-sensitive adjudication. Customary dispute resolution fora are male-dominated, and evidence shows they issue rulings that disadvantage women in land, inheritance and marital disputes.<sup>122</sup>

In FCAS, these structural constraints are compounded by insecurity and institutional fragility. Women face significant barriers to accessing courts and customary authorities, and even when they obtain favourable rulings, implementation is often weak. In Burundi, widows are sometimes blocked from formal courts, and customary authorities refuse to hear their claims, enabling in-laws to appropriate land with impunity.<sup>123</sup> In South Sudan, women are largely excluded from chiefs' courts and county courts, and favourable rulings are rarely enforced because of insecurity and limited administrative capacity.<sup>124</sup> In Colombia, women who win restitution cases still struggle to recover land as local elites resist enforcement and institutions lack the capacity to implement court-ordered returns.<sup>125</sup>

Where women hold secure, documented rights, they are better able to defend their land rights and withstand appropriation by male relatives, in-laws or exclusionary customary norms. In Benin for example, formalisation strengthened widows' ability to defend claims and supported enforcement against family appropriation.<sup>126</sup> Similarly, in Malawi, women used recognised rights and paralegal support to secure favourable implementation of decisions against land grabbers.<sup>127</sup> In Iraq, evidence of occupancy enabled women to reach enforceable mediated agreements and recover property.<sup>128</sup> Taken together, these cases show that in FCAS, when women lack secure land rights, they are structurally excluded from courts, dispute-resolution and enforcement systems. Where women hold secure rights and can access functioning dispute-resolution mechanisms, they are more able to seek justice, enforce decisions and rebuild livelihoods. This implies that in FCAS, when women lack secure land rights, they are structurally excluded from courts, dispute-resolution and enforcement systems. **When women hold secure rights and can access functioning dispute-resolution mechanisms, they are more able to seek justice, enforce decisions and rebuild livelihoods. WLTS, therefore, becomes a foundational enabler of recovery and stability.**

### 3.3.4 Mechanism 4: Women in Mediation and Peace Processes

#### Key Facts



Although evidence directly linking secure land rights to women's participation in conflict mitigation and prevention is limited, emerging findings show that where women participate, they are more effective peace and mediation actors.<sup>129</sup> UN Women, drawing on evidence from 40 countries, found that women's meaningful participation in peace negotiations increases the durability of agreements.<sup>130</sup>

This pattern is visible across FCAS. In Liberia, women were initially excluded from the 2003 Accra negotiations but gained observer status through mass mobilisation, enabling them to influence the agreement and later support land governance reforms that strengthened women's land rights.<sup>131</sup> In Colombia, women's organisations shaped

the 2016 peace agreement by securing gender-responsive provisions, including more than 120 measures on gender equality, land restitution and rural reform. Their advocacy ensured recognition of women's differentiated experiences of dispossession and introduced safeguards for women's land claims in transitional justice and restitution processes.<sup>132</sup> In Mozambique, women have played documented peacebuilding roles, mediating local disputes, creating safe spaces for at-risk women and girls, and challenging discriminatory customary practices.<sup>133</sup> These examples demonstrate the value of women's meaningful participation, and show how it strengthens the legitimacy of peace processes and ensures that women's priorities, including land-related concerns, are addressed.

In contrast, gender-blind dispute resolution and peace processes leave core conflict drivers unresolved. In South Sudan, the 2015 Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict and the 2018 Revitalised Agreement recognised women's political participation but did not address gendered land rights, even though land remained a central driver of conflict.<sup>134</sup> Evidence shows that women were largely absent from the formal negotiations that shaped these agreements, despite their extensive roles in community-level peacebuilding. Their exclusion limited the scope of the settlements and contributed to weak attention to land governance, displacement and restitution—issues that continued to fuel instability. Similarly, women were largely excluded from the 2006 Darfur Peace Agreement and the development of the 2011 Doha Document, which focused on power-sharing and security arrangements but failed to address land, displacement and local governance—issues central to the conflict.<sup>135</sup> **The South Sudan and Sudan experience shows that when women are excluded, land governance and restitution are less likely to be addressed, leaving core drivers of violence unresolved and sustaining instability.**

This pathway has demonstrated that WLTS is a key and often overlooked factor shaping conflict resilience in FCAS. Insecure land rights heighten women's exposure to GBV, undermine their ability to return and secure restitution, weaken their position in dispute-resolution systems, and limit their influence in peace processes. Where women's land rights are recognised and enforceable, they are better able to protect their claims, reclaim land after displacement, leave violent relationships, negotiate safe sex and navigate justice mechanisms, and participate as credible peace actors—strengthening the prospects for prevention, mediation and durable settlement.

### Pathway 3: Conflict Prevention and Mitigation Confidence Framework

| Mechanism                            | Key Evidence Signal                                                                                          | Confidence          |
|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------|
| GBV–WLTS Nexus                       | Property ownership contributes to the reduction in HIV/AIDS vulnerability                                    | Emerging            |
|                                      | Insecure WLTS exposes women to coercion, economic abuse and violence when asserting rights                   | Strong              |
|                                      | Conflict actors weaponise sexual violence to drive displacement and seize land                               | Strong              |
|                                      | WLTS strengthens women's ability to leave violent relationships and reduces dispossession risks.             | Emerging            |
| Return and Restitution               | Secondary occupation, weak administration and discriminatory norms limit women's return                      | Strong              |
|                                      | Gender provisions in peace agreements often fail in implementation; women lack documentation to reclaim land | Emerging            |
|                                      | Secure WLTS improves ability to reclaim property and resolve competing claims                                | Emerging            |
| Dispute Resolution                   | Women face structural exclusion from courts and customary systems; rulings often disadvantage women          | Strong              |
|                                      | Secure, documented rights improve enforcement and outcomes                                                   | Emerging            |
|                                      | Low representation of women in justice institutions undermines legitimacy and gender-sensitive adjudication. | Strong (structural) |
| Women in Mediation & Peace Processes | Women's meaningful participation increases durability of peace agreements                                    |                     |
|                                      | Women shape more gender-responsive and land-sensitive settlements when included                              | Emerging            |
|                                      | Exclusion from peace processes leaves land, displacement and restitution unaddressed, sustaining instability | Strong              |

## **4.0. Approaches to Strengthening Women's Land Tenure Security**

This section examines approaches used by development actors, including intergovernmental and multilateral organisations, States, international non-governmental organisations, and national and local civil society organisations to strengthen women's land rights in FCAS. Over the past decade, development actors have built a substantial body of programming experience on strengthening WLTS, drawing on best practices reflected in policy documents, institutional reports, independent programme evaluations and academic research. Within FCDO, women's land rights remain fragmented across governance, humanitarian, livelihoods and gender portfolios, with limited integration as a structural component of conflict resilience. The following section sets out eight approaches to WLTS programming, drawing on examples of effective practice and identifying potential limitations of interventions.

### **4.1 Approach 1: Awareness Raising and Legal Literacy**

Awareness raising and legal literacy are core entry points for strengthening women's land rights in FCAS. Conflict disrupts institutions and erodes rule-based land governance, leaving women who rely mainly on informal or derivative rights at heightened risk. Limited awareness of land rights remains one of the most persistent barriers to women claiming, using and defending their rights, particularly where documentation is weak and customary systems dominate.<sup>136</sup> Strengthening legal literacy in FCAS enhances women's agency, reduces dependence on male intermediaries and improves their ability to navigate both formal and customary dispute-resolution systems.<sup>137</sup> Awareness raising and legal literacy can be delivered through multiple, context-adapted channels to reach women where they are. Programmes use community theatre, radio, television, mobile messaging, and other digital tools, alongside simple written materials translated into local languages.<sup>138</sup>

A model developed by Namati, a global civil society organisation, deploys trained community paralegals to strengthen women's land rights. Paralegals translate complex land laws, customary rules and administrative procedures into simple, practical guidance through community meetings, women-only dialogues, household visits, visual aids, storyboards and role-plays delivered in local languages.<sup>139</sup> In Sierra Leone, this approach has enabled women to challenge exploitative corporate practices, secure fairer compensation, influence relocation processes and embed gender-equitable norms in community land governance.<sup>140</sup>

The work of global civil society organisation Landesa in Liberia, supporting implementation of the 2018 Land Rights Act, provides a scalable model for translating legal reform into community-level understanding. Using Amplio Talking Books, Landesa delivered information on women's land rights, land formalisation and dispute resolution in 13 local languages. The solar-powered devices enabled repeated, private access in low-literacy settings and were reinforced by community dialogues and women-only sessions.<sup>141</sup> Evaluation shows marked gains in legal knowledge and participation, with women more engaged in land discussions and local leaders incorporating them into decision-making.<sup>142</sup> The model demonstrates the value of multi-channel, context-adapted delivery that addresses literacy barriers and social norms.

Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC)'s Information, Counselling and Legal Assistance (ICLA) model in Lebanon, Somalia, Afghanistan and Colombia reinforces this approach.<sup>143</sup> ICLA combines legal information with counselling, documentation support and assistance in dispute resolution through outreach, mobile clinics and community paralegals. This integrated support enables displaced women to claim and exercise their HLP rights, secure documentation, navigate complex legal systems and obtain enforceable outcomes that would otherwise be inaccessible

Evaluations of programme interventions show that awareness alone is insufficient in FCAS where conflict-affected institutions, weak documentation systems and discriminatory norms limit women's ability to act on legal information. Legal awareness interventions often fail when they are not grounded in local context, do not address structural barriers, and rely on information delivery alone. NRC's ICLA model, shows that women cannot act on legal information when documentation systems are weak, mobility is restricted, customary authorities dominate decision-making, or enforcement is unreliable. Meaningful outcomes emerge only when legal knowledge is paired with context-responsive, hands-on navigation support that helps women overcome structural barriers such as documentation loss, mobility constraints, and discriminatory customary practices. Programmes that treat women

as a homogenous group fail to reach those facing overlapping barriers (disability, age, marital status, indigeneity, displacement).<sup>144</sup> NRC evaluations found that marginalised groups, including people with disabilities were not reached, gender sensitivity was limited (e.g., women could not choose the gender of their lawyer), and clinic accessibility constraints excluded less mobile clients.<sup>145</sup> Programmes that bypass customary authorities face low uptake or backlash, and even when women understand their rights, weak enforcement, corruption and elite capture prevent them from securing outcomes.<sup>146</sup> This highlights that designing land governance programmes in FCAS requires grounding interventions in local context, women's lived realities and the intersecting barriers they face, because only context-responsive, intersectional approaches can overcome the structural constraints that otherwise limit uptake and impact.

## 4.2 Expanding Women's Land Access and Governance Roles in Customary Tenure Systems

Across FCAS and rural contexts, customary, religious and local administrative leaders remain the primary arbiters of land allocation, dispute resolution and community norms. Their decisions shape whether women can inherit, document, use or transfer land. Whether women can claim or defend rights is shaped by the extent to which these leaders facilitate or hinder access. Emerging evidence from FCAS programmes shows that when customary and local leaders actively endorse women's land rights and support their participation in community land bodies, exclusionary gender norms begin to shift, backlash is reduced, and community acceptance increases.<sup>147</sup> Development actors are leveraging this by combining gender quotas in land governance bodies, support to women's leadership structures in common land management institutions, and targeted capacity-building, to expand women's roles in land governance while working through, rather than around, customary authority.

A growing number of countries, including Mozambique, Liberia, Uganda, Tanzania and Rwanda, have adopted gender quotas to correct the systematic exclusion of women from land and natural-resource governance.<sup>148</sup> These measures are typically embedded in statutory land laws, community-based natural resource frameworks, or customary governance reforms, and are often paired with leadership training and social-norm interventions to translate numerical presence into influence. In Nepal, the national policy requires that at least 50% of Community Forest User Group (CFUG) executive committee members are women. The policy is enforced by the Government of Nepal through the Ministry of Forests and Environment. This quota has created real leadership pathways, not symbolic roles. Through CFUGs, women access training, exchange visits and practical leadership development. Many become strong, respected leaders for the whole community, not only for women.<sup>149</sup> These platforms give rural women the space to organise, set priorities and negotiate their land concerns at local, regional and national levels.

Across multiple programmes, actors have introduced gender quotas in customary and community land-governance bodies to accelerate women's representation and shift entrenched male dominance. In Zambia, USAID's Integrated Land and Resource Governance (ILRG) programme supported gender-inclusive election procedures and quota-based candidate requirements, which increased women's representation from 23% to 41% in Village Action Groups and from 4% to 25% in Community Resource Boards.<sup>150</sup> These quota measures were reinforced through leadership training and engagement with traditional authorities, demonstrating that formal inclusion rules, when paired with norm-shifting strategies, can meaningfully expand women's roles in land governance. This approach is reflected in broader ILRG gender assessments, which emphasise quotas as a necessary corrective in contexts where social norms systematically limit women's participation.<sup>151</sup>

Beyond the USAID-funded ILRG programmes, the International Land Coalition's (ILC) Rangelands Initiative in Tanzania supported Women's Rights and Leadership Forums (WRLFs), creating dedicated spaces for pastoralist women to learn about and defend their land rights, speak in public, and influence village land-use decisions.<sup>152</sup> A WRLF is made up of 24 people, 20 women and four *Iliaigwanak* (Maasai male customary leaders). The project provided training to both women and men on women's land rights, while offering women-only sessions on entrepreneurship and leadership to strengthen their confidence and practical skills. The forums raise community-wide awareness of women's rights, secure individual land titles for women, and shift male leaders' perceptions through deliberate engagement with customary authorities. They have increased women's confidence, leadership, and representation in village councils, while also building cohesion and collective action that helps women challenge dispossession and claim their rights.

Despite increased representation, women's participation in land committees has not always translated into substantive influence. Social norms continue to shape behaviour. Evidence from Nepal, Tanzania's WRLFs and

USAID's ILRG work in Zambia shows that women often remain silent in mixed-gender meetings, while those who do speak rarely raise issues related to women's land rights because cultural expectations still dictate deference to male authority.<sup>153</sup> The same pattern is confirmed in Liberia. UN Women's evaluation report on peace and land governance programme found that entrenched sociocultural norms, lack of confidence and illiteracy continued to limit women's voice and influence, even where they held formal seats on community land structures.<sup>154</sup>

As a result, the presence of women in leadership roles does not reliably shift decision-making outcomes, and committee membership alone is insufficient to address entrenched gender hierarchies. This challenge was observed across partners. Closing this gap requires strengthening women's actual influence, not just their presence, through confidence-building support, tailored leadership training, gender-responsive committee procedures, and active engagement of male leaders. **Shifting the deep-rooted norms that shape land and gender relations is inherently a long-term process, and sustained investments in social norm change beyond land security are essential to dismantle the hierarchies that limit women's participation in land governance.** This constraint is especially pronounced in FCAS, where weak institutions and power asymmetries make norm change more urgent and complex.

#### HOLISTIC APPROACHES TO SUPPORT IMPLEMENTATION

Legal quotas in Tanzania have ensured that women hold a substantial share of seats in formal land governance bodies, with statutory requirements ranging from one quarter to one third. But the evidence shows this has delivered **numbers without voice**. Women's representation tends to be limited to the minimum required by law and their participation remains largely passive, with many simply listening to discussions rather than influencing them. Even where women are present in significant numbers, their views are ignored or not treated with equal importance to those of male representatives, meaning quotas have not translated into meaningful influence.

(Source: Chan et al., Strengthening Women's Voices, 2016)<sup>155</sup>

### 4.3 Ensuring Women's Collective Land Rights

Collective land allocation for women and girls is an emerging approach to strengthening tenure security where customary systems constrain individual ownership. In FCAS, as in other rural contexts, access to common property is essential for women, who rely on shared lands for water, fuelwood, edible and medicinal plants, and building materials that underpin household nutrition, livelihoods, and daily survival.<sup>156</sup> Evidence indicates that collective tenure can improve access to land and resilience when it is supported by strong governance, legal recognition, and gender-responsive design.<sup>157</sup> Programmes are increasingly applying this approach through measures such as securing group land certificates for women's associations, integrating women's collectives into community land governance structures, supporting women-led natural resource groups, and strengthening dispute-resolution mechanisms to protect collective holdings. Outcomes are highly context-dependent and cannot be assumed without complementary institutional and economic support.<sup>158</sup>

The Tenure Facility's programme in Burkina Faso, delivered by TenForest Network and the Ministry of Agriculture, illustrates a promising design: women's associations are supported to secure collective land certificates across approximately 3,000 hectares. This aligns with evidence that collective action can strengthen women's bargaining power and access to resources.<sup>159</sup> In Mali's Alatona project delivered by Millennium Challenge Corporation, women's gardening associations received titled irrigated land to prevent reversion to men under inheritance norms.<sup>160</sup> The ILC toolkit on strengthening women's rights to common lands provides an extensive synthesis of effective approaches. Across contexts, programmes strengthen women's rights through women-only leadership spaces in Tanzania; gender-responsive governance reforms, including mandatory women's representation and revised by-laws in Nepal and Peru; and legal measures such as joint or collective titling in Peru, Guatemala and Argentina.<sup>161</sup> These approaches are reinforced by women-led natural resource groups in Tanzania and Colombia, and by multi-level advocacy linking community mobilisation to national reform in Peru and Argentina.

The USAID–Illovo RLBI pilot in Mozambique used cooperative-issued land certificates to reduce documentation barriers for smallholder women. These certificates were widely accepted for outgrowing contracts, strengthened farmers' confidence in asserting land rights, and provided a tangible sense of tenure security and legitimacy in dealings with Maragra Açúcar.<sup>162</sup>

The ILC Toolkit shows that while these strategies can shift power and secure women's claims, gains remain uneven and reversible unless they are institutionally anchored, socially legitimised, and backed by sustained political support and practical entrepreneurial capacity development, and access to finance and markets. In the USAID–Illovo RLBI pilot in Mozambique and the MCC Alatona Irrigation Project in Mali, only a minority of women reported economic gains, and impacts were not achieved at scale, with benefits largely captured by men.<sup>163</sup> Cooperative certificates also failed to translate into meaningful economic benefits due to limited opportunities for productive use, particularly among women. The Mozambique evaluation underscores the need to pair land certification with targeted, gender-responsive support programmes that strengthen the link between tenure security and economic opportunities.<sup>164</sup> Without deliberate, gender-responsive interventions to address structural constraints—such as smaller and lower-quality land plots, external threats of land grabbing, limited business and financial skills, and restricted market access, collective tenure risks remaining formal but not transformative for women and girls.<sup>165</sup> These findings reinforce wider evidence that formal land rights alone rarely deliver empowerment or sustained economic gains where gender norms and systemic barriers remain unaddressed.<sup>166</sup>

#### **4.4. Housing, Land and Property (HLP) Rights in Humanitarian Response**

HLP support is a core component of humanitarian response, enabling displaced populations to secure shelter, recover documentation and assert rights during and after crises. Key actors include the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), which delivers legal assistance, dispute resolution and tenure support through its ICLA programmes; UN-Habitat, which leads on land governance and settlement planning; and United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), which integrates HLP within protection, shelter and durable solutions programming. Together, these actors contribute to reducing the risk of evictions, restoring documentation and strengthening tenure security in displacement settings.

UNHCR's work in Honduras shows how early HLP action can directly protect the rights of displaced women and girls. By documenting abandoned homes and land, strengthening legal frameworks, and integrating verified records into the national property registry, UNHCR helped ensure that women's often-informal tenure rights were not lost during displacement.<sup>167</sup> The early HLP intervention from the outset of humanitarian response preserved evidence for restitution and compensation, reduced the risk of fraudulent claims, and created a pathway for women to reclaim housing and land even when return was not immediately possible.

In Mogadishu, displaced women and girls face constant eviction risks due to discrimination, lack of written rental agreements, and unsafe informal housing. To address these risks, the Danwadaag Consortium (NRC, International organisation for Migration (IOM) and Save the Children) applies an integrated approach that targets women at imminent risk of eviction with rental subsidies, legal identity support, HLP assistance, and tailored livelihood support.<sup>168</sup> Evidence from the Danwadaag shows that linking HLP assistance with legal identity, shelter and livelihoods improves recovery pathways, particularly for female-headed households. The approach helps women secure safer housing, reduce eviction risks, and move towards more stable, dignified lives. Integrated HLP programming delivers stronger and more durable outcomes than siloed interventions

In Sudan, UNHCR demonstrated the strength of the Humanitarian-Development-Peace (HDP) nexus approach by deliberately linking emergency protection and assistance to longer-term recovery and resilience for displaced people and host communities.<sup>169</sup> Its approach combined life-saving support with early livelihood and documentation initiatives in active conflict, enabling women to rebuild homes and participate in local recovery planning. While the evaluation does not reference tenure security directly, these measures strengthened women's stability and self-reliance, turning a short-term response into a foundation for durable solutions and resilience.

What works is evident - integrated, gender-responsive HLP programming delivers more durable outcomes. Combining legal assistance, documentation and recovery support strengthens tenure security and enables return. Early intervention is critical, particularly to protect women's and girls' rights before they are lost. The HDP nexus approach also shows promise. A recent evaluation of UNHCR's multi-country L3 response to the Sudan crisis confirms that nexus approaches are feasible in active conflict settings and can support resilience outcomes, including in contexts such as Chad.<sup>170</sup>

However, late or fragmented HLP interventions rarely secure tenure early or enable durable return.<sup>171</sup> One-off or short-term approaches fail to address the structural barriers that women and girls face in accessing and enforcing their rights. When HLP is treated as an afterthought, critical opportunities to secure documentation and establish claims are lost, with lasting consequences.<sup>172</sup> Although UNHCR's HDP nexus approach has shown promising results, it has not been scaled due to financing constraints. The UNHCR evaluation in Sudan indicates that without predictable development financing, nexus approaches cannot be expanded, limiting their broader impact on resilience and tenure security.<sup>173</sup>

This implies that HLP must be treated as foundational infrastructure for humanitarian, development and peace programming. It must be embedded from the outset, with explicit measures to secure women's and girls' HLP rights, including early documentation, gender-responsive programming, and sustained financing to support the transition from emergency response to durable solutions. Without this, displacement risks being prolonged, returns may remain insecure, and gender inequalities in access to land and housing are likely to persist.

#### 4.5 Gender-Sensitive Dispute Resolution

**Across many FCAS, where WLTS is weakest, access to land is determined in practice by dispute resolution systems rather than formal law.<sup>174</sup> Formal courts remain largely male-dominated, inaccessible in rural areas due to distance, cost, language and documentation barriers.<sup>175</sup>** As a result, most land disputes are resolved through male-dominated customary or hybrid systems led by chiefs, elders or local committees.<sup>176</sup> Although these systems are more accessible, they are shaped by gender norms that frequently disadvantage women, particularly in inheritance, divorce and secondary land rights.<sup>177</sup> Where women lack access to fair and effective dispute resolution mechanisms, their land rights remain insecure in practice, regardless of formal legal recognition.<sup>178</sup>

Development partners have increasingly shifted from a narrow focus on statutory law reform to strengthening the gender responsiveness of dispute resolution itself. The Carter Centre's access to justice programming in Liberia has worked with customary leaders to strengthen community-level dispute resolution and increase women's participation in local mediation and dispute resolution processes.<sup>179</sup> However, the final evaluation of this programme also documents persistent gender bias in customary dispute outcomes and highlights weak integration between customary Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) and national justice frameworks, which undermines long-term impact. In Sierra Leone, FAO's Community Conflict Monitors and Mediators (CCMM) strengthened women's access to justice by training 60 women to monitor and resolve land-related disputes through Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR).<sup>180</sup> The evaluation shows increased women's participation in dispute-resolution processes, with over 560 women trained on gender, land rights and ADR, and two women champions subsequently appointed as the first female town chiefs—demonstrating women's growing authority in customary justice structures. Legal empowerment organisations such as Namati deploy community paralegals in Kenya, Sierra Leone, and Myanmar to bridge law and practice, supporting women and communities to navigate dispute processes, mediate locally and assert rights. Trained in basic law, mediation and advocacy, these paralegals have helped communities engage with land disputes and legal processes, including around forestry and land deals.<sup>181</sup>

Intergovernmental organisations such as the International Development Law Organisation (IDLO) advance gender-sensitive reforms of customary and informal justice systems, enhancing capacity to improve women's access to justice. IDLO's programming spans multiple countries and emphasises strengthening institutions that adjudicate disputes and uphold rights.<sup>182</sup> Other actors, including UN Women and the World Bank, promote gender-sensitive ADR through toolkits and capacity building that guide actors on incorporating women's inheritance and land rights into dispute processes.<sup>183</sup>

The evidence shows that sustained, integrated engagement is effective because it builds the conditions for women to exercise land rights and strengthens the institutions that recognise them. Long-term support to customary leaders improves governance and clarifies rules, while continuous legal empowerment deepens women's ability to claim rights and navigate disputes. Multi-year accompaniment embeds these shifts in ways that short, one-off training cannot.<sup>184</sup> As institutions become more responsive, paralegal support expands women's access to dispute processes,<sup>185</sup> and community-based structures reinforce their confidence to assert claims. Clear, gender-sensitive ADR guidance then enables actors to operate coherently across the customary–statutory interface and reduces bias.

By contrast, isolated, short-term interventions and court-centred models deliver limited results because they do not shift the norms or institutions that determine outcomes.<sup>186</sup> Short programme cycles create form without function and leave women exposed, as seen in South Sudan when FAO and UN-Habitat's programme on enhancing women's access to land for peace and development closed before titles were issued and insecurity deepened.<sup>187</sup> One-off training and awareness do little to challenge entrenched norms, and evaluations from programming by USAID in Liberia and UN Women in Uganda show that procedural improvements alone do not produce equitable outcomes without enforcement, norm change and institutional incentives.<sup>188</sup> ADR processes that operate without clear local and statutory linkages or accountability mechanisms similarly reproduce gender inequalities and entrench existing power relations.<sup>189</sup>

#### 4.6 Gender-Transformative Land Titling

Across FCAS, development actors are focusing their interventions on gender-transformative land titling, with a particular emphasis on joint titling, strengthened legal safeguards and incentive-based approaches designed to secure women's formal land rights and produce clearer, more enforceable claims. SLLC, supported through the DFID/FCDO-funded LIFT programme and implemented with DAI, remains one of the most extensively documented examples. The programme required joint certification with both spouses' names and photographs and issued both individual and joint certificates.<sup>190</sup> Programme evaluation finding shows that women, individually or jointly, account for approximately 74 per cent of certificate holders, with reported improvements in perceived tenure security, reduced eviction risks, and increased access to credit and land rental markets.<sup>191</sup> This aligns with broader evidence that gender-integrated titling can strengthen formal rights when embedded in administrative systems that explicitly include women.<sup>192</sup>

Similarly, in Rwanda, the land tenure regularisation programme combined mandatory joint titling with spousal consent requirements for land transactions, strengthening women's decision-making authority and preventing unilateral sale or transfer.<sup>193</sup> The use of accessible documentation, including photographs, further reduced barriers in low-literacy and resource-constrained settings and demonstrated that integrating women directly into formal registration systems is both feasible and replicable.<sup>194</sup> Development actors have also used financial incentives to accelerate uptake. In Tanzania, reduced fees for certificates, conditional on women's co-ownership, significantly increased joint registration.<sup>195</sup> Reforms to marital and inheritance law in Lesotho and Rwanda have enabled women to be legally recognised as co-owners and expanded the number of jointly held titles.<sup>196</sup> These interventions show that behavioural and financial incentives are central to shifting titling outcomes in practice, particularly in contexts where social norms constrain joint registration.

Community-led mapping approach has emerged as a practical extension of women's land rights, enabling local groups to document women's access, ownership, and control through sketch maps, transect walks using simple GPS tools, and validation in community meetings.<sup>197</sup> These processes expose gaps and patterns of dispossession, generate data missing from official registries, and surface local realities that national systems overlook. Using this evidence, GROOTS Kenya and local women successfully lobbied for land registries to be located closer to communities, reducing a major barrier created by distance.<sup>198</sup>

Actors are also linking WLTS to GBV prevention and reductions in HIV/AIDS risk. In Kenya, GROOTS responded to rising cases of disinheritance by establishing Community Watchdog Groups composed of volunteer women and men, community health workers, traditional leaders, trained paralegals and government actors to monitor violations, mediate disputes and refer unresolved cases involving land rights and GBV.<sup>199</sup> Anecdotal evidence indicates broader reductions in GBV through increased community awareness, improved reporting mechanisms and more comprehensive responses. Under the RISE Challenge, Women for Women International and Innovation and Training for Development and Peace adapted GBV programming in the DRC to focus on land rights—an area of pronounced vulnerability for women facing high levels of violence and low land ownership—strengthening both access to land and referral pathways.<sup>200</sup>

These examples sit alongside a broader set of lessons on what makes gender-responsive titling effective in practice. Gender-responsive titling works when interventions are tailored to the context rather than built around a single tool, and when registration processes clearly record all rights holders through adequate space for multiple names, signatures and photographs. Stronger outcomes emerge when programmes invest in sustained awareness creation and capacity building so women and men understand their rights, the implications of registration and available protections. Best practice also includes safeguarding women in informal or polygamous

unions and ensuring that individual titling does not erode secondary rights embedded in social tenure systems. These elements are most effective when combined with gender-sensitive dispute resolution and women's active participation in adjudication and boundary demarcation.

A number of barriers continue to limit the sustainability and depth of gender-transformative impact. Social norms and entrenched cultural practices continue to shape women's access, use and control of land, and gender-responsive titling has not consistently shifted intra-household decision-making. In Ethiopia, UN Women found that joint certification did not alter control over land use, with decisions on crops, inputs and marketing remaining largely male-driven.<sup>201</sup> Even when women do hold land, the plots are often smaller or of lower quality than those held by men.<sup>202</sup> This is consistent with broader evidence that legal reforms alone do not shift entrenched social norms governing land control.<sup>203</sup> Inconsistency between land laws, family law and customary practice further constrains outcomes.<sup>204</sup> In Rwanda, for example, women in informal or polygamous unions remain outside joint-titling protections despite constitutional advances in gender equality.<sup>205</sup>

Operational and institutional barriers compound these constraints. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, UN-Habitat's programme evaluation highlights the risks of elite capture, including instances where authorities promoted formalisation to generate revenue from registration fees.<sup>206</sup> In South Sudan, the Enhancing Women's Access to Land for Peace and Development programme, delivered by UN-Habitat and FAO, closed before titles were issued, raising expectations without delivering protection and leaving women more insecure.<sup>207</sup> Inadequate sensitisation also leads some men to exclude their wives from joint registration due to concerns about divorce or inheritance.<sup>208</sup> Supply-driven interventions add further constraints: local actors lack the capacity to maintain complex registration systems, digital requirements exclude women, and design processes rarely incorporate women's experiences, limiting continuity once external support ends.<sup>209</sup> Finally, titling can unintentionally reshape tenure systems in ways that disadvantage women, particularly models that register only the male household head and extinguish secondary or overlapping rights embedded in social tenure systems.<sup>210</sup>

These challenges are amplified in FCAS, where institutional fragility, legal pluralism and persistent social norms limit the impact of formal reforms. This highlights that gender-responsive titling must sit within long-term strategies that align laws, shift norms, strengthen local capacity and centre women's participation so that documentation translates into substantive control rather than reinforcing existing inequalities.

## CASE STUDY | IRAQ

### UN-Habitat's Social Tenure Domain Model (STDM): Low-Cost, People-Centred Tenure

**Documentation in Post-ISIS Sinjar, Iraq** Following the destruction of Yazidi settlements by ISIS, UN-Habitat used the low-cost Social Tenure Domain Model (STDM) to document land rights through a people-to-land relationship approach rather than formal cadastral mapping. STDM enabled rapid mapping of claims, recognition of informal and overlapping rights, and issuance of community-validated occupancy certificates that supported safe return. The programme directly addressed systemic barriers to women's tenure: female-headed households were prioritised; flexible evidentiary standards accepted community testimony, photographs and utility records; and certificates co-validated by local authorities named all household members, including women and children—disrupting the default male-headship model that routinely excludes women from restitution. The results were tangible: certificates strengthened women's tenure security, reduced land disputes, reinforced trust in local institutions, and facilitated voluntary return. The central government subsequently accepted the certificates as legally valid and requested national scale-up. The STDM approach demonstrates that incremental, community-validated tenure recognition is central to stabilisation, sustainable return and conflict prevention in FCAS contexts where formal land administration has collapsed (Source: **UN-Habitat, *Land and Conflict*, 2018**).<sup>211</sup>

## 5.7 Restitution

In post-conflict settings, land restitution is critical but highly contested. Women face distinct disadvantages as displacement, lost documentation, overlapping claims and weakened customary protections limit their ability to reclaim land and access justice. In line with the Pinheiro Principles, restitution supports the right to return, strengthens tenure security and reduces land-related disputes. It also helps restore livelihoods and consolidate peace in fragile contexts.<sup>212</sup> Global experience shows, however, that outcomes depend not only on legal frameworks but on sustained institutional capacity, accessible justice mechanisms and effective implementation.<sup>213</sup>

Experience from Colombia shows that restitution can progress, but it is slow and depends on sustained judicial action, specialised courts and strong institutional support.<sup>214</sup> Court-led investigations, legal assistance, flexible evidence rules and protective measures have improved outcomes, yet they require lengthy proceedings and continuous security guarantees.<sup>215</sup> Women continue to face greater obstacles in navigating procedures, securing documentation and asserting independent claims.<sup>216</sup> Similar patterns appear in Northern Uganda, where customary mediation resolves some disputes but struggles with secondary occupation, weakened clan authority and overlapping claims.<sup>217</sup> These processes also disadvantage women, particularly widows, divorced women and formerly abducted women, because exclusion from clan decision-making and entrenched norms limit their ability to claim rights.

The central insight is that restitution works when it is treated as a long-term governance and peacebuilding intervention rather than a narrow legal process. Progress depends on strong cadastral systems, accessible legal aid, coordinated institutions and security conditions that allow safe return and enforcement. Integrating restitution with wider rural development, justice and peacebuilding efforts also helps ensure that restored rights lead to durable outcomes.

What limits impact is treating legal recognition as a standalone intervention. On its own, it does not deliver reparation because it does not address the structural and institutional barriers that shape women's ability to exercise rights. Experience from Colombia shows that outcomes hinge on policy design, implementation practices and women's socio-demographic conditions.<sup>218</sup> **Without differentiated legal assistance, recognition of women's independent claims and protection measures, restitution risks becoming symbolic—acknowledging harm without addressing the power imbalances that prevent women from securing meaningful reparation.**<sup>219</sup>

## Summary of Approaches

| Approaches                                             | What Works                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   | What Limits Impact                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
|--------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Awareness Raising and Legal Literacy</b>            | Multi-channel, context-adapted delivery that reaches women where they are. Community paralegals who translate law into practical guidance. Legal information paired with hands-on navigation support. Intersectional design that reflects women's lived realities.           | Awareness campaigns delivered in isolation. Models that ignore mobility, literacy or disability barriers. Clinics without gender-sensitive procedures. One-off training that does not address structural constraints.                                                                                                  |
| <b>Expanding Women's Roles in Customary Governance</b> | Gender quotas backed by leadership training and engagement with customary authorities. Dedicated women's forums that build confidence and collective action. Long-term norm-shifting strategies that secure community acceptance.                                            | Quotas without enforcement or support. Committee seats without influence. Reliance on customary bodies that exclude women from decision-making. Short programme cycles that do not shift norms.                                                                                                                        |
| <b>Collective Land Rights for Women and Girls</b>      | Legally recognised group certificates. Strong governance arrangements and women-only leadership spaces. Integration with natural resource groups and multi-level advocacy. Targeted support linking tenure to economic opportunities.                                        | Collective titles without institutional anchoring. Certificates without complementary measures such as economic empowerment and skills development struggle to translate to productive use. Benefits captured by men. Projects that ignore structural constraints such as land quality, market access and skills gaps. |
| <b>HLP Rights in Humanitarian Response</b>             | Early HLP action that protects claims before they are lost. Integrated programming linking legal aid, documentation, shelter and livelihoods. HDP nexus approaches that connect emergency support to recovery. Gender-responsive design that prioritises women at risk.      | Late or fragmented HLP interventions. One-off assistance that cannot secure tenure or enable return. Lack of predictable financing for nexus approaches. Treating HLP as an add-on rather than core infrastructure.                                                                                                    |
| <b>Gender-Sensitive Dispute Resolution</b>             | Long-term engagement with customary leaders. Paralegal support that bridges law and practice. Gender-sensitive ADR guidance that aligns customary and statutory systems. Multi-year accompaniment that embeds institutional change.                                          | Court-centred models that are inaccessible to women. Short projects that end before systems stabilise. ADR without statutory linkages or accountability. Training that does not address entrenched gender bias.                                                                                                        |
| <b>Gender-Responsive Land Titling</b>                  | Joint titling with space for multiple names, signatures and photographs. Mandatory spousal consent. Incentive-based models that increase uptake. Awareness and capacity building that explain rights and protections. Safeguards for women in informal or polygamous unions. | Titling as a standalone intervention. Registration systems that default to male headship. Weak sensitisation that fuels exclusion. Misaligned land and family laws. Supply-driven models that exceed local capacity. Titling that extinguishes secondary or overlapping rights.                                        |
| <b>Restitution in Post-Conflict Settings</b>           | Judicial leadership, specialised courts and strong institutional support. Flexible evidence standards for displaced claimants. Protection measures in insecure areas. Integration with wider justice, rural development and peacebuilding efforts.                           | Treating restitution as a purely legal process. Weak institutional capacity and limited access to justice. Approaches that ignore gendered barriers to documentation and claims. Models that deliver symbolic recognition without addressing structural inequalities.                                                  |

## 5.0 Impacts of inaction

This section sets out the impacts of inaction on WLTS based on the evidence review undertaken and in relation to the ToC established in section 2. Evidence from section 4 above shows that when women's land tenure is insecure, displacement tends to become more protracted, household assets are more likely to erode, exposure to violence and exploitation increases and the costs of recovery rise across FCAS. The following analysis examines these dynamics in practical terms and shows how inaction on WLTS translates into delayed return, weakened livelihoods, higher protection risks and increased long-term expenditure.

### 5.1 Value for Money Lost

WLTS is a value-for-money safeguard across FCDO's portfolio because its major programmes depend on land.<sup>220</sup> In practice, agricultural production, governance programmes, food security, climate adaptation, infrastructure delivery and humanitarian return all require predictable access to land and protection against competing claims. In a context where UK aid has fallen from 0.5% to 0.3% of Gross National Income, WLTS offers a practical entry point for reducing avoidable costs across humanitarian, development and peacebuilding portfolios without creating new standalone programmes. Section 4 demonstrated that when women are unable to secure or defend land, agricultural production tends to weaken, food security gains are harder to sustain, and women's participation in governance can be constrained. Limited adoption of climate-smart practices can further reduce the impact of climate resilience programming. In humanitarian settings, insecure land tenure for women is a significant and often overlooked factor that can delay return, increase caseloads and prolong dependence on assistance. It can also contribute to local tensions as unresolved land claims accumulate, heighten protection risks and in some cases, trigger evictions.

The financial cost is visible. In Somalia, for example, more than USD 4.6 million of donor-funded WASH, education and community infrastructure was destroyed through eviction because communities lacked secure rights to the land they occupied.<sup>221</sup> Although this affected both men and women, it illustrates how land-dependent programmes remain vulnerable when WLTS is not addressed. By contrast, when women's land tenure is secure, women are likely to invest in farming, adopt climate-smart practices, participate in governance, rebuild livelihoods and return earlier, supporting the durability of UK investments in food security, climate adaptation, WPS and open societies. Integrating WLTS into existing FCDO portfolios improves programme outcomes, reduces exposure to conflict-related risks and supports the sustainability of UK investments in FCAS. When WLTS is overlooked, programmes become more vulnerable to predictable shocks and pressures that more secure land rights help to mitigate.

### 5.2 Inaction negatively impacts the returns on food security investment

Secure land rights for women contribute to food security in FCAS. The discussion in section 4 above showed that when women lack secure tenure, the returns on agricultural investment fall, and resilience gains are harder to sustain. FAO's 2023 flagship report on women in agrifood systems estimates that gendered inequalities in access to land and productive resources generate a 24% productivity gap between women and men farmers on comparable land.<sup>222</sup> WFP reports that of the 318 million people facing extreme hunger, almost 60 per cent are women and girls, and women are more likely than men to report food insecurity in two-thirds of countries. The United Nations notes that nearly four million people across the Sahel have been uprooted by a volatile mix of conflict, hunger and climate change, and women and children account for 80 per cent of those displaced.<sup>223</sup> Closing the productivity and agrifood wage gap would add roughly USD 1 trillion to global GDP each year and reduce the number of food-insecure people by around 45 million.<sup>224</sup> The FAO 2023 report also finds that reaching just half of small-scale producers with women's empowerment interventions would raise incomes for 58 million people and strengthen resilience for around 235 million. In FCAS, where women produce much of the food but hold the least secure rights to the land they farm, strengthening women's land rights can support progress on food security, nutrition, dietary diversity and reducing child malnutrition. WLTS contributes to making agricultural investments and resilience gains more durable, reduces hunger-induced displacements, facilitates progress on SDG 2 (Zero Hunger) and aligns with the UK's work on food security.

### 5.3. Inaction magnifies climate-driven displacement and migration pressures

Section 4 highlighted that strengthening women's land rights contributes to climate adaptation by enabling long-term investments in soil restoration, water management and sustainable land use, thereby improving the effectiveness of climate adaptation programmes. The World Bank's *Groundswell* analysis projects that, without decisive climate and development action, up to 216 million people could be forced to move within their own countries by 2050 as climate impacts undermine water availability, crop productivity and habitability.<sup>225</sup> The report also shows that early action could cut internal climate migration by up to 80 per cent by 2050, while inaction risks climate-migration hotspots emerging within the next decade, with pressures that may spill across borders.

In many of the FCAS regions where FCDO works, these pressures arise in settings where land is already contested, and institutions are weak. When tenure is insecure, climate shocks trigger displacement rather than adaptation. Where women's land tenure is insecure, women are less likely to invest in land they may lose, communities struggle to plan safe or orderly relocation, and receiving areas face intensified land pressure and heightened conflict risk. Strengthening women's land rights can improve the effectiveness of climate-resilience programmes by ensuring that investments translate into durable resilience rather than repeated emergency response. Addressing WLTS gaps also tackles one of the structural drivers of climate-related mobility and international migration, an issue of growing concern to the UK, and supports contributions to the UK's work on climate adaptation and SDG 13.

### 5.4. Inaction contributes to larger, longer and more expensive humanitarian caseloads

Protracted crises are structurally maintained when, following conflict or insecurity, displaced people are unable to return to areas where they can safely access services, rebuild livelihoods or reclaim land. In many FCAS, insecurity, damaged infrastructure, ongoing violence and weak institutions interact with insecure land rights for women to delay or limit return. By the end of 2024, 123.2 million people worldwide were forcibly displaced, the highest number ever recorded.<sup>226</sup> Women face the greatest barriers to return because their land rights are undocumented, land records have been destroyed, family and social networks have been disrupted, customary authorities have fragmented and armed groups occupy or redistribute land with impunity.<sup>227</sup> Where WLTS is absent, return stalls, displacement is likely to become prolonged and humanitarian needs escalate. In post-ISIS Iraq, NRC found that returnee women were 14 per cent more likely than men to fear eviction, even after reconstruction funds had been disbursed and infrastructure rebuilt.<sup>228</sup> The physical environment was restored, but women could not return to claim what had been rebuilt because they were unable to reassert their land rights. A similar pattern was documented in Myanmar, where displaced women reported that they could not return because they had no secure land to go back to.<sup>229</sup> In Colombia, displacement remains protracted because the restitution process has restored only 536,148 hectares by 2022—less than 10 per cent of the six-million-hectare goal—leaving many families unable to return even when restitution is legally available.<sup>230</sup> Women, Indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities are among the most affected, as slow legal procedures and weak state protection limit them from securing tenure or reclaiming land, limiting both return and the effectiveness of restitution.

If the current global crisis follows a similar trajectory, displacement could last a decade or more, with substantial humanitarian and stabilisation costs. Using conservative assumptions, if 3 million displaced people require assistance at £400–£500 per person per year, the humanitarian cost alone would exceed £12–15 billion over ten years — excluding far larger losses in output, peacekeeping and reconstruction. The rising displacement caseload demands sustained investment in emergency response, even as crises become more protracted. Strengthening women's land rights will not solve these pressures on its own, but it can enable safer, earlier return for a significant share of displaced households and, over time, ease the humanitarian burden by reducing repeated displacement and long-term aid dependence.

## **5.5 Inaction sustains the GBV–tenure insecurity cycle**

As highlighted in Section 4, insecure tenure removes the basic conditions that enable women to leave violent partners — a safe place to go, the economic leverage to support themselves, and the social recognition needed to assert their rights — and increases their exposure to GBV.<sup>231</sup> Evidence from Zambia shows that land interventions can trigger backlash when household power relations are not addressed, with programmes reporting increased domestic tension and violence when men perceive a loss of authority over family land.<sup>232</sup> Women's loss of access to land and livelihoods is also an under recognised factor that contributes to women being pushed into negative coping mechanisms, including transactional sex, which heightens HIV risk and deepens vulnerability. The economic burden is substantial: in Ethiopia, intimate partner violence costs an estimated USD 1.3 billion a year, around 1.2 per cent of GDP through lost productivity, foregone earnings and health-sector costs.<sup>233</sup> These risks expose women to further harm and can undermine programme outcomes. Strengthening women's land tenure security does not resolve these pressures on its own, but it can reduce GBV and HIV vulnerability and lower the programme-level risks created when WLTS is overlooked. Over time, this improves the effectiveness and durability of FCDO investments and delivers stronger value for money.

## **5.6. Women and Girls Commitment**

The March 2026 commitment to Women and Girls, and the International Women and Girls Strategy (2023–2030) that underpins it, place women's safety, agency and economic security at the centre of UK foreign policy.<sup>234</sup> WLTS is foundational to all three. It also advances the UK's Women, Peace and Security National Action Plan (2023–2027) by strengthening the protection and participation pillars, both of which depend on secure rights to land.<sup>235</sup> Integrating WLTS into programming protects FCDO investments and improves outcomes across governance, climate and humanitarian portfolios. It also supports progress on the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 2.3, which aims to double the productivity and incomes of small-scale food producers—especially women—through secure rights to land and productive resources.

## Summary of Impacts of Inaction

| Impact Area                                              | Diagnostic Summary of Inaction                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   | Implications for FCDO Priorities & VfM                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
|----------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Value for Money Lost                                     | Insecure land tenure for women undermines agricultural production, weakens food security gains, limits climate-smart adoption and constrains women's participation in governance. In humanitarian settings, it can delay return, increase caseloads and heighten local tensions. | Programmes become more exposed to predictable shocks; land-dependent investments (e.g., WASH, education, infrastructure) face avoidable losses; WLTS improves durability of UK investments in food security, climate adaptation, WPS and open societies. |
| Food Security Returns Weakened                           | Gendered inequalities in land access reduce productivity, weaken resilience and increase hunger-driven displacement. Women farmers face a 24% productivity gap; women and girls represent 60% of those facing extreme hunger.                                                    | Strengthening WLTS improves food availability, nutrition and resilience; reduces hunger-induced displacement; supports SDG 2 (zero hunger) and UK food-security priorities.                                                                              |
| Climate-Driven Mobility Intensified                      | Insecure tenure makes climate shocks more likely to result in displacement rather than adaptation. Women are less likely to invest in land they may lose; communities cannot plan relocation; receiving areas face intensified pressure.                                         | WLTS can improve the effectiveness of climate adaptation programmes and address a structural driver of climate-related mobility, supporting SDG 13 and UK climate priorities.                                                                            |
| Larger, Longer and More Expensive Humanitarian Caseloads | Insecure land rights for women delays return, displacement becomes prolonged and humanitarian needs tend to escalate. Women face distinct barriers due to documentation loss, fragmented authorities and occupation of land.                                                     | Protracted displacement increases humanitarian costs; secure WLTS can enable safer, earlier return and reduce long-term aid dependence.                                                                                                                  |
| GBV–Tenure Insecurity Cycle Sustained                    | Insecure tenure limits women's ability to leave violent partners, increases exposure to GBV and can push women into negative coping strategies, including transactional sex, heightening HIV risk.                                                                               | WLTS can reduce GBV and HIV vulnerability, strengthen programme outcomes and lower the economic burden of violence (e.g., Ethiopia's USD 1.3 bn annual IPV cost).                                                                                        |
| Women & Girls Commitments Undermined                     | When women's land tenure is insecure, progress on safety, agency, economic security and participation is constrained.                                                                                                                                                            | WLTS underpins delivery of the Women and Girls Strategy and the WPS National Action Plan; integrating WLTS supports the durability of FCDO investments across governance, climate and humanitarian portfolios.                                           |

## 6.0 Entry Points

The entry points below set out a time-bound sequence for integrating WLTS across UK portfolios, from immediate safeguards to medium-term capacity building and longer-term systems integration. This creates a clear pathway for operationalising commitments across humanitarian, development and investment portfolios

### Summary of Entry Points

| Time Frame  | Priority Action                                                                                 | Summary                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
|-------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 0–12 months | <b>WLTS as a safeguard in humanitarian and early recovery programming</b>                       | Require partners to show how women's land and housing rights will be protected from the outset of displacement, return and reintegration. Early safeguards prevent predictable losses and protect UK-funded shelter, livelihoods, protection and Women & Girls outcomes. |
|             | <b>WLTS risk screening in all existing and new land-dependent business cases</b>                | Screen for WLTS risks before funds are committed. This protects agriculture, food security, climate, infrastructure and rural development investments from eviction, land capture and discriminatory inheritance, and strengthens value for money.                       |
| 1–3 years   | <b>Embed WLTS safeguards across all land-dependent programmes</b>                               | Apply proven safeguards such as joint titling, spousal consent and women's documentation across climate, food security, agriculture and rural development. These measures protect UK-funded gains and ensure investments endure beyond programme cycles.                 |
|             | <b>Build WLTS capacity across FCDO teams and partners</b>                                       | Strengthen the Capacity of programme teams and delivery partners to identify and manage WLTS risks through guidance, diagnostics and training. This ensures consistent application of safeguards across the portfolio.                                                   |
| 3–10 years  | <b>Integrate WLTS into FCDO systems and policy architecture</b>                                 | Embed WLTS into Women and Girls guidance, climate and nature risk tools, country diagnostics and governance frameworks. This creates durable, portfolio-wide resilience and protects UK interests across climate, food security and conflict prevention.                 |
|             | <b>Strengthen responsible business and British International Investment (BII) due diligence</b> | Integrate WLTS into investment-climate programming and BII due diligence to reduce reputational and operational risk for UK investors and reinforce UK leadership on responsible investment.                                                                             |

## 7.0 Strategic Recommendations

These actions are practical and can be delivered within existing FCDO systems and portfolios. They do not require new standalone programmes, but a shift in how current investments are designed and implemented. Priority should be given to embedding WLTS in high-risk, land-dependent programming and using existing policy, safeguarding and investment levers to drive consistent application.

- **Treat WLTS as a resilience and recovery issue.** In FCAS, land is not a technical issue but a source of identity, livelihood, authority and a site of conflict. Insecure land rights for women contribute to prolonged displacement, weaker recovery and local grievance in FCAS. WLTS should therefore be positioned as a stability, protection and resilience investment rather than a niche thematic issue.
- **Integrate WLTS across humanitarian, climate, food security, governance and peacebuilding programming.** Evidence indicates that outcomes are stronger where legal support, livelihoods, governance reform and social norm change are addressed together rather than through isolated interventions.
- **Embed early women's rights to Housing, Land and Property (HLP) support into humanitarian response and durable solutions programming.** Early action on documentation, dispute resolution and protection against secondary occupation can reduce dispossession risks and support safer return and recovery. Sequencing matters, and protection and legitimacy must come before formalisation.
- **Move beyond generic gender mainstreaming approaches.** Women in FCAS face heightened tenure insecurity, exclusion from decision-making and heavy recovery burdens. Effective WLTS practice requires dedicated expertise, targeted resources and practical support to help women navigate claims, documentation and disputes in systems that are often inaccessible or contested.
- **Engage with customary systems alongside formal institutions.** Land governance in FCAS is plural. Courts, chiefs, elders, women's groups and local authorities all shape outcomes. Sustainable progress depends on engaging these actors, ensuring women's meaningful participation in dispute resolution and supporting norm change over time, while avoiding the entrenchment of exclusionary gatekeepers.
- **Support gender-transformative, conflict-sensitive land governance and registration systems.** Formalisation can reduce harm but can also entrench exclusion. WLTS systems must recognise overlapping, shared and secondary rights, and avoid rigid boundary-making where mobility, seasonal access or collective use underpin resilience. Low-cost approaches such as the Social Tenure Domain Model (STDM) offer a people-to-land method suited to FCAS. In post-ISIS Sinjar, this approach documented informal and overlapping rights, including women's claims, and community-validated certificates improved tenure security and enabled safe return.
- **Treat WLTS as a programme risk and value-for-money consideration.** Insecure tenure can increase exposure to eviction, asset loss, repeated displacement and programme disruption across humanitarian, climate and livelihoods investments. Strengthening WLTS reduces downstream costs and supports the resilience of FCDO portfolios.
- **Use existing FCDO policy and investment levers rather than creating standalone WLTS programmes.** WLTS aligns with current shifts toward systems support, local leadership, resilience and responsible investment. Opportunities for integration already exist across Women and Girls, WPS, climate, humanitarian, governance and responsible investment portfolios.

## **8.0 Conclusion**

The evidence is clear: women's land and housing rights are not a marginal gender issue. They are a central determinant of whether crises resolve, whether development gains hold, and whether UK investments deliver the resilience outcomes they are designed to achieve. Across FCAS, weak WLTS is a recurring reason why displacement becomes protracted, why climate and food security investments fail to scale, and why recovery stalls. Where women are unable to document, claim or enforce rights to land and housing, return is delayed or impossible, livelihoods collapse, and humanitarian caseloads harden into long-term fiscal liabilities.

Despite this, the programming landscape shows a persistent disconnect between gender commitments and delivery. Gender is often treated as a mainstreaming issue, without dedicated budgets, technical depth or accountability for outcomes. This obscures the specific legal, social and institutional barriers women face. The result is predictable: programmes report gender 'integration' while women remain unable to access documentation, inherit land, resolve disputes, or protect their homes from eviction. Without attention to WLTS, gender commitments struggle to translate into meaningful outcomes, and resilience gains are harder to sustain. remain rhetorical and resilience programming delivers diminishing returns.

For the UK, WLTS is a value-for-money safeguard across major priorities: Women and Girls, climate adaptation, food security, conflict prevention, open societies and responsible investment. It is also a practical means of delivering wider UK commitments, including Women, Peace and Security, where women's protection, participation and leadership depend in practice on secure land and housing rights. Investments that overlook WLTS may face higher long-term costs and undermine delivery against the UK's strategic objectives in FCAS.

The opportunity is clear and actionable. By systematically integrating WLTS into humanitarian safeguards, development design standards, climate and nature programming, governance frameworks and responsible business guidance, FCDO can protect its portfolio, reduce long-term liabilities and strengthen community resilience. This does not require new programmes. It requires deliberate use of policy, programme and investment levers the FCDO already controls.

## **Annex 1: Evidence selection**

### **1. Evidence selection approach**

The analysis used a structured, multi-stage evidence identification process to ensure that only credible sources were included:

- Reviewed authoritative repositories (USAID Development Experience Clearinghouse, World Bank Land & Poverty papers, FAO, IFAD, Tenure Facility, RRI, IDRC, MCC, ILC, Mercy Corps, and peer-reviewed journals).  
Prioritised evaluations and implementation reports - Included only projects with verifiable documentation (evaluation, midline, endline, or donor-validated reporting).
- Promotional or advocacy material was not treated as evidence
- Excluded anecdotal or single-source claims unless corroborated by a second reputable source.
- Undertook triangulation: a project was only included when at least two independent sources confirmed its existence, dates, implementer, and core activities.

This ensured the evidence base was traceable, citation-proof, and defensible.

### **2. Criteria for inclusion**

A project was included only if it met all of the following:

- Direct relevance to women's and girls' land and tenure security (WLTS)
- Clear documentation of implementation (dates, location, implementer)
- Evidence of outcomes or lessons (not just intentions)
- Geographic relevance to selected FCAS regions or comparable FCAS contexts
- Credible institutional source (donor, evaluator, or implementing agency)

### **3. Bias-control measures**

To reduce bias and ensure balanced representation:

- Cross-checked donor narratives with independent evaluations to avoid relying solely on implementer-reported success.
- Actively sought negative or mixed findings, not only positive cases, to avoid optimism bias.
- Balanced regions and intervention types so the evidence did not over-represent East Africa or land-titling projects at the expense of governance, dispute resolution, or social norms interventions.
- Checked for publication bias by including grey literature (e.g., Tenure Facility, RRI, MSI, IDRC) where peer-reviewed sources were limited.
- Ensured gender-specific outcomes were explicitly documented, not inferred.

### **5. How gaps were handled**

Where evidence was incomplete or ambiguous, the analysis:

- Flagged the gap rather than filling it with assumptions.
- Cross-referenced similar interventions to avoid over-generalisation.
- Excluded projects where dates, implementers, or outcomes could not be verified.

## Annex 2: Conflict-Phase Matrix

The matrix below sets out each pathway across the three stages of the conflict cycle — pre-conflict, active conflict and post-conflict. It is diagnostic, not prescriptive — it maps where WLTS shapes fragility dynamics across phases, enabling colleagues at different points of the conflict spectrum to identify where their work intersects with the framework.

|                                                      | Pre-Conflict                                                                                                               | Active Conflict                                                                                                       | Post-Conflict                                                                                                            |
|------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Pathway 1<br/>Economic<br/>Resilience</b>         | Tenure insecurity suppresses investment & climate adaptation; female-headed households accumulate structural vulnerability | Displacement destroys tenure evidentiary base; land weaponised; productivity collapse drives humanitarian dependence  | Exclusion from restitution prevents recovery investment; negative coping transmits vulnerability to next generation      |
| <b>Pathway 2<br/>Governance &amp;<br/>Legitimacy</b> | Exclusionary land governance accumulates grievance; women's absence from dispute forums weakens early-warning capacity     | Institutional collapse removes residual protections; governance legitimacy deficit deepens; aid bypasses tenure       | Gendered restitution failures embed inequality in the post-conflict order; women excluded from reconstruction governance |
| <b>Pathway 3<br/>Conflict<br/>Mitigation</b>         | Insecure derived rights generate recurring disputes; women with secure rights function as effective mediation actors       | Land weaponised via sexual violence and documentation destruction; eviction deployed as strategic displacement tactic | Unresolved women's HLP grievances are a primary driver of conflict recurrence; unaddressed, they seed the next cycle     |

**Annex 3: Key learnings of Programmes Reviewed**

| Programme                                                                                                          | Country                          | Year      | Partner            | Details                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------|-----------|--------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Enhancing Women's Access to Land for Peace and Development in South Sudan 2018-2020                                | South Sudan                      | 2018-20   | UN-Habitat and FAO | The programme strengthened peace, return and reintegration by improving women's and young people's tenure security and their role in land-related decision-making. It increased women's understanding of their rights and how to claim them, while making land administration more responsive and expanding space at local, state and national levels to discuss women's land rights through targeted awareness-raising and capacity development. |
| Programme Support to Land Governance for Peace, Stability and Reconstruction in Eastern DR Congo Post Conflict Era | The Democratic Republic of Congo | 2014-2019 | UN-Habitat         | The project aimed to reduce land disputes and support peaceful community development by using Community Participatory Land Use Planning to strengthen tenure security and improve local land management. It sought to build community capacity, provide practical tools for land use planning, and influence policy and reform to create a more responsive and equitable land governance system.                                                  |
| Community Land Protection Programme (CLPP) in Liberia                                                              | Liberia                          | 2014-2017 | Namati             | The program initially aimed sought to support communities to protect their community lands and natural resources and improve local land and resource governance for the overall benefit of communities. To do so, CLPP specifically aimed to assist communities through legal empowerment, by-law development, governance strengthening, resource valuation, boundary mapping, and conflict resolution                                            |
| Scaling Community Land Protection in the face of Large-scale Investments in Sierra Leon                            | Sierra Leon                      | 2020-21   | Namati             | This programme supports communities to protect customary land rights, address environmental harm, and negotiate fair agreements with investors, particularly in the context of large-scale agriculture and mining.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
| Land Tenure Assistance (LTA) Activity                                                                              | Tanzania                         | 2015-2019 | DAI                | LTA supported land use planning and delivered formalised documentation of customary rights to village residents, known as Certificates of Customary Rights of Occupancy (CCROs), through the use of the Mobile Application to Secure Tenure application.                                                                                                                                                                                          |

|                                                                   |                                                    |           |                                            |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------|-----------|--------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Participatory Rangelands Management Project in Tanzania and Kenya | Kenya and Tanzania                                 | 2017-2021 | International Land Coalition               | PRM is participatory approach to rangeland management that brings all users together to negotiate and agree on a legally binding rangeland plan. It strengthens tenure security, improves land use and management systems, and builds community capacity while influencing wider land policy and reform. The project aims to secure and improve rangeland use and expand women's roles in pastoral communities in Kenya and Tanzania. |
| Responsible Land-Based Investment Pilot in Mozambique             | Mozambique                                         | 2015-2018 | Illovo Sugar Africa's Maragra Sugar Estate | The USAID–Illovo RLBI pilot used cooperative-issued land certificates to reduce documentation barriers for smallholders.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
| Information, Counselling and Legal Assistance (ICLA)              | Lebanon                                            | 2017-2021 | NRC                                        | ICLA been providing information, counselling and legal assistance (ICLA) to Syrian refugees since the start of the Syrian refugee influx into Lebanon in 2012.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| Tenure Facility                                                   | Burkina Faso                                       | 2022-2026 | TenForest                                  | A tenure-security initiative supporting forest-dependent communities—especially women's associations—to obtain legally recognised collective land rights (CRLH) and strengthen local land charters, improving long-term access, governance and protection of forest lands.                                                                                                                                                            |
| Land Investment for Transformation (LIFT)                         | Ethiopia                                           | 2014-2021 | DAI                                        | The programme aimed to strengthen rural landholders' tenure security and create better conditions for investment and income growth. To achieve this, it helped the Government of Ethiopia introduce Second Level Land Certification and develop digital Rural Land Administration Systems, modernising how rural land rights are recorded and managed                                                                                 |
| Stand for Her                                                     | Liberia, Colombia, Kenya, Senegal Tanzania, Uganda | *         | Landesa                                    | A social-norms and community-leadership project that engages clan, religious, and local council leaders to transform harmful norms, strengthen women's land rights under customary tenure, and improve justice outcomes for women at community level.                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| Integrated Land and Resource Governance (ILRG)                    | Zambia, Malawi and Mozambique                      | 2018-2023 | TeTra Tech                                 | USAID's ILRG programme in Malawi and Zambia strengthens customary land governance by documenting land rights, supporting joint (men–women) land certification, and building the                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |

|                                                                                                                                                              |                                |           |            |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------|-----------|------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                                                                                                                                                              |                                |           |            | capacity of traditional authorities and district land institutions.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
| Creating peaceful societies through women's improved access to management of natural resources, land tenure rights and economic empowerment in Sierra Leone" | Sierra Leon                    | 2019-2020 | FAO & ILO  | A peacebuilding project that strengthened gender-inclusive land governance and expanded women's economic empowerment to address two core drivers of conflict in Sierra Leone: gender discrimination and fragmented land governance.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
| Alatona Irrigation Scheme                                                                                                                                    | Mali                           | 2007-12   | MMC        | A large-scale irrigation and land tenure reform project that expanded irrigated farmland, upgraded canals and roads, formalised land rights, and resettled affected households to boost agricultural productivity and secure land tenure in the Alatona zone                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
| Conflict Resolution on Land and Natural Resources: Afro-Colombian Women's Leadership for Land Tenure in the Middle and Lower Atrato, Choco                   | Colombia                       | 2014      | Mercycorps | A conflict-resolution and women's land rights initiative that strengthened Afro-Colombian women's leadership in land governance, improved their ability to claim and defend collective land rights, and supported community-based mechanisms to reduce land-related conflict in the Atrato region                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
| L3 Emergency Response to the Sudan Situation (Sudan, Chad, Egypt and South Sudan)                                                                            | Sudan,<br>South Sudan,<br>Chad | 2023-2025 | UNHCR      | UNHCR's multi-country Level 3 emergency response is a large-scale humanitarian operation across Sudan, Chad, Egypt and South Sudan, launched after the April 2023 outbreak of conflict between SAF and RSF. The project focuses on life-saving protection, registration, shelter, core relief items and cash assistance for more than 11 million displaced people, while coordinating the wider refugee response and supporting governments and partners. It also examines how effectively UNHCR addressed needs, coordinated actors and adapted to severe underfunding, using mixed-method evaluation evidence. |
| Sustaining Peace and Reconciliation through Strengthening Land Governance and Dispute Resolution Mechanisms in Liberia                                       | Liberia                        | 2020-2023 | UN Women   | The programme aimed to strengthen county land offices and link them with existing and newly established dispute-resolution structures under the Land Rights Act, while supporting early steps toward formalising customary land to prevent disputes between customary landowners and users. It also reinforced semi-formal                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |

|  |  |  |  |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|--|--|--|--|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|  |  |  |  | and informal mechanisms—including multi-stakeholder platforms and the new Community Land Development and Management Committees to reduce land-related conflicts through more transparent, effective and gender- and youth-responsive processes. |
|--|--|--|--|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

## Endnotes

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