



# Case Study: Land Portal

## Overcoming Land Data Silos : The role of data ecosystems in achieving global development goals

### Principle(s) Addressed

Use Open Data, Open Standards, Open Source & Open Innovation; Be Collaborative



### Overview

When disasters displace people, land records and geospatial data are key to protecting property rights and building resilience. When land conflicts occur, it is clear that conciliation efforts would benefit from access to data and evidence. In order for marginalized peoples and communities to gain control of their rights, there is no doubt that data, information and knowledge are indispensable. At the Land Portal, we carry out a variety of collaborative initiatives and partnerships to make the existing data and information ecosystem on land more democratic and inclusive by promoting open data principles and best practices. In other words, we want all land related information and data to reach as many people as possible so that it may eventually get into the hands and minds of those who are in a position to implement change.

More specifically, the Land Portal increases access to information for all land governance stakeholders, especially in the Global South. Our target audiences include data users, producers and intermediaries among land practitioners and policymakers, land activists, researchers, media professionals and journalists. Our aim is to gather information from a broad range of information providers and serve as an intuitive gateway to the different information providers on land related issues. We do this by hosting metadata that is linked directly to the websites of data sources. Furthermore, we offer a wide array of services, including the consolidation of statistical information and providing country and thematic overviews of key contextual and actionable land governance information, revealing both trends and gaps. We also serve as a free virtual repository of bibliographic



*Laura Meggiolaro, Land Portal team leader, presenting at the Committee on World Food Security 2018, FAO HQ, Rome*



and multimedia resources with highly curated metadata. Finally, we serve as a space to stimulate debate with others in the land community through sharing of news and events, blog posts and online discussions.

## Background

The common thread which sews our work together is participatory and collaborative approaches to managing and publishing information. The Land Portal Team works diligently to curate and clean datasets, publish and share information, making it widely available. At the Land Portal, we engage in what we call ‘participatory communication’, and we actively work to make the existing ecosystem of land-related information and data more inclusive and democratic by reaching out to actors in the land community whose voices may otherwise be drowned out. Our work involves:

- Packaging and contextualizing existing data and information to provide a comprehensive but digestible overview of what data and information exists and providing a narrative around it to make it understandable to and useable for a wide range of users;
- Co-authoring blogs with partners, co-organizing online discussions and spearheading media partnerships with organizations to elevate and draw attention to local, less visible land related issues;
- Helping partners to improve their data publishing practices and to adhere to international open data standards, making their data and information much more visible at the global level and increasing the possibility that their data will be used by others significantly.

To achieve these aims, we have instituted a broad array of initiatives. Just a few examples are:

- **LandVoc:** To accommodate the fact that land is a topic debated across the world, in many natural languages and in a variety of different academic disciplines, it is important to have a common vocabulary to classify data and information to ensure no perspectives are lost. When a grassroots NGO wants to spread its good practice on mapping land boundaries in a “favela” in Rio de Janeiro, it would be a missed opportunity if this could not be applied in a “township” in Johannesburg, simply due to a linguistic difference in describing an issue in which the right connections



*Laura Meggiolaro presenting at the India Land and Development Conference 2018 in New Dehi*

## Objectives

Why do we do what we do?

1. We want to **improve documentation, mapping and monitoring of land governance issues** through the provision of a widely used platform, tools and services;
2. We want to **promote, inform and enrich global debate and practice on key land issues** while providing further awareness on selected thematic areas of central importance to land governance;
3. We want to **democratize the information landscape by raising awareness on Open Data principles**, supporting the creation of a solid data infrastructure and building the capacities of information providers, in order to **strengthen the flow of land governance information at all levels.**



are not being made. The Land Portal experienced this issue with its numerous data sources using different terms to classify similar issues and decided to intervene, as no standard vocabulary for land governance existed. We enriched the land concepts of FAO's agriculture vocabulary (AGROVOC) and set up a separate concept scheme for land, LandVoc, as a linked land governance thesaurus. We added translations in various languages, from English and French to Swahili and Khmer. We have had local partners reviewing the list of concepts, and suggesting new concepts as well as synonyms to reflect the local usage of language.

- **Dataset, Issue and Country portfolios:** To make it easier to digest the vast variety of land related data that can often get hidden on the virtual corners of the internet, and provide more context to cold figures and numbers, we have created dataset, issue and country sections on the Land Portal. These sections not only show the diverse sources that provide data or information about the same issue or country, but also provide narratives and stories around them. We hope to enable data conversations to go beyond data scientists speaking to other data scientists. Not only does the Land Portal provide a useful overview of all indicators and datasets developed by other organizations, we also enrich the data with detailed (standard) metadata, making the data more comparable, as well as possible to be downloaded and visualized. Ultimately, we hope that through our work, we can equip a range of actors, from those working in civil society, to researchers and heads of government, with the necessary information needed to implement effective policies and programmes that can improve security of tenure.

## Actions

### 1. Analysis and Planning

In the analysis and planning stage of our work, we focus on identifying existing complementarity and synergies with other land organizations. We seek collaboration and try to understand which actors and colleagues in the sector can get on board and benefit from our projects, how they could contribute and how we can mutually use each other's strengths to achieve a desired outcome. The Land Portal's main area of work is not to create new information or data; it is to bring evidence and information produced by others to the surface for the land community to use and drive change. This is why the vast majority of our projects are partnerships.



LandVoc is a prime example of this. First, we didn't invent a new vocabulary from scratch, but built upon the existing FAO vocabulary AGROVOC, therefore benefiting the AGROVOC community as a whole. To ensure LandVoc is a relevant tool for the whole land governance community, the Land Portal has been enhancing the set of land terms by asking local partners to review the list, add synonyms and translations and suggest words that should be included or removed. This is where the spirit of cooperation necessary to make all this work comes in! This is an immense added value to the general global vocabularies and thesauri that are being built in the global North and by the global organizations.



Another example is a set of data we've enriched in collaboration with our colleagues at Prindex. Prindex is a dataset that collects robust data on perceptions of property rights to help build a world where everyone feels secure in their right to their home. Together with the team at Prindex, we have engaged in a variety of initiatives, from ingesting their data, to visualizing it in an intuitive way, to creating a [dedicated page](#) on Prindex which aggregates not only data but also other content that provides more context, such as articles and blog posts. We also are co-hosting a series of webinars with Prindex to discuss the importance and the implications of collecting data on the perception of tenure security. This approach of aggregating different content types together and creating a story around the data and generating discussions about their importance and usefulness resonated with our users who appreciate this portfolio approach and the opportunity to interact with data.

Using a similar approach, we work with a myriad of data providers at the local level. Through our consistent efforts, we now have almost 600 indicators and over 50,000 bibliographic resources which emanate from a 2000 data providers. One thing which they all brings them together is the idea that sharing data is essential to make sound decisions on equitable land governance. This diversity of sources and perspectives increases the idea that land issues are complex and multidisciplinary by nature, enhance the quality of the information landscape and makes it much more democratic.

## 2. Design & Develop

In the design and development phase of many of our projects, it is essential that we keep in mind that land is an extremely controversial



subject in which many different actors are involved, both on a very local and global level, each with their own particular agendas. The stakes for those involved can be incredibly high, as having access to information equals having power. We therefore take a neutral stance in all that we do. This means that we understand the delicate nature of the work and allow different perspectives to be represented. Open Data is crucial to this as it increases transparency and visibility of certain content that is usually invisible.

In order for LandVoc to be a generally accepted, it was important that we approached the development and ownership of it collaboratively. LandVoc would never be fully adopted by the land governance community if it was branded as a Land Portal product or if we had the only decision on vocabulary. LandVoc is not a brand, nor 'owned' by any organization. Land Portal coordinates and facilitates its development. We use the frequency of usage of certain terms by a community of users to create the vocabulary. We will also establish an editorial community with renowned land experts that will have the deciding power on which concepts shall be retained or excluded from LandVoc.

The same holds true for the datasets that we incorporate into the Land Portal's offer. We collect and disseminate information and data from various information providers around the world – from global organizations to local ones – on the Land Portal website. We help local organizations from around the world to publish, organize and expose their information according to Open Data principles – making it easier to find on a global level and linkable to global databases. We do not make it our mission however, to evaluate, judge or interpret any of the data or the providers of said data. We are simply here to open up the roads and make sure that data and information get into the hands of those who wish to use it.

### 3. Deploy & Implement

In deploying and implementing our work, we take practical steps to ensure that we work according to open data standards in ways that encourage cooperation and emphasize our neutral stance.

When it comes to LandVoc, we have set up an independent website: <https://www.landvoc.org>. This, once again, reiterates that we do not own LandVoc, but are simply facilitating and coordinating. The adoption of LandVoc by the wider land governance community will also require a

**“Since we are into advocacy, the publications found on the Land Portal help us in gathering the facts we need.”**

- Land Portal user



significant amount of awareness raising and capacity building about the advantages and the practical elements to adopting a standard vocabulary. A strong communications campaign making this rather technical message tangible for audiences will support this effort.

The ingestion of Prindex and similar datasets, as well as datasets ingested from smaller organizations in the global South, require high levels of collaboration. Our team often reaches out to data providers to enquire as to whether they are interested in having their data shared on the Land Portal. Once we receive the go-ahead, we begin the arduous but exciting tasks of cleaning datasets, preparing and ultimately publishing them. Our communications team then does their piece of the work by ensuring that the newly ingested dataset receives attention via different social media platforms and a variety of different outlets.

The key is that these processes are dynamic and organic. In our field of work, things are constantly changing and we are ready and willing to learn and adapt.

#### 4. Monitor & Evaluate

In assessing the work that we carry out, we are thorough in ensuring both internal and external evaluation mechanisms are put in place. Our work is multifaceted and our audiences, from local to global, can require different information as well as information that is packaged and presented in varying formats. It is therefore essential that we monitor our efforts closely to ensure that we are delivering on our originally set out goals.

In terms of internal evaluation mechanisms, which our team use on a regular basis to monitor our performance and impact, one of our preferred tools is Google Analytics. This allows us to get to know the demographics of our audience, how they move within the website as well as keep pace with their changing needs. More importantly, however, Google Analytics allows us to understand how our audience is engaging with our content and what is relevant moving forward. This tool is especially useful as a monitoring and evaluation mechanism for our communications team, allowing them to direct content and giving them opportunity to reflect on new and innovative ways to present our data, for example, so that it can be easily understood and used. In addition to this, we also run regular and detailed surveys that help us to ask our users direct and clear



#### RESOURCES

Land Portal:  
<https://landportal.org>

Land Voc:  
<https://www.landvoc.org>

Contact info:  
<https://landportal.org/about/contact-us>



questions on how they view the quality of our work. This allows us to gather their thoughts and suggestions, and helps us in project planning and prioritization phases.

Finally, we of course, have put in place periodic external evaluation mechanisms in order to continuously improve our core functions as a team, but also to improve our outputs. The goal is to assess and measure our progress towards our strategic objectives and to get deeper insights, and ultimately to gain a better understanding of these strategic objectives so we are in a position to more effectively achieve them. One of the prospects of this new round of evaluation will be participatory and collaborative, with the implementation of “critical friends”. We will provide extensive opportunities for our valuable partners and those who are in key positions in land sector to provide constructive and necessary feedback.

**“The Land Portal has given me ideas on how to promote information exchange and sharing within my country, as well as for an international audience.”**

- Land Portal user

## Lessons Learned and Recommendations

- **Collaboration is key** [<https://digitalprinciples.org/principle/be-collaborative/>]: To do our work effectively and efficiently, we require the commitment of our team as well as the trust of our partners. By building an environment of trust with our data providers, in which we help to facilitate as opposed to dominate or micromanage processes, we have been able to create long standing and committed working relationships with our partners.
- **Neutrality is necessary**: As mentioned, we are in the business of ensuring that information and data related to land governance are as openly available as possible. The information we work with is sensitive and often challenges the status quo. The only way to stay true to our values of openness, honesty and encouraging a democratic information landscape is to be impartial and give all stakeholders a fair chance at having their data exposed on the Land Portal. Each set of data represent a certain perspective at a given moment in time. That’s why data quality to us means diversity of perspectives. We want to facilitate processes, as opposed to exercising control over them.
- **Open standards make the real difference**: At the Land Portal, we believe that access to and use of data leads to improved land governance. We want to share land related data ethically but without restriction. It is this information, which does not hide behind licenses, paywalls or other technical restrictions, which increases transparency, accountability and helps to enhance decision-making at all levels, from smallholder farmers to policy makers. By using data and information more efficiently, people can explore building new applications and tools which can help them in analyzing and assessing land governance trends and paths as well as untap innovation and new revenue generating activities. This is why we aim to raise awareness on Open Data principles [<https://digitalprinciples.org/principle/use-open-standards-open-data-open-source-and-open-innovation/>], support the creation of a solid data infrastructure and build the capacities of information providers, in order to strengthen the flow of land governance information at all levels.