A story of enduring impact and self-sustaining change

By Elizabeth Daley

April 7th, a beautiful Brisbane morning. I am walking along the riverfront towards the entrance of the International Federation of Surveyors (FIG) Working Week and Locate25, hosted jointly this year with the Geospatial Council of Australia. I am presenting on 'Innovative Good Practices for Inclusive and Gender-Equitable Land Governance, Land Management and Landscape Development Planning in Mongolia', with a panel of esteemed colleagues working on a range of key areas for women's land rights. The issues we discuss range from empowering women and young girls to pursue careers in surveying and mapping in Kiribati; attracting women into all the land sector professions in Queensland; supporting women in Uruguay to access decent housing; using machine learning algorithms to spot gender inequalities in the Colombian real estate market; and my own experience of developing gender-transformative land governance tools with the Women's Land Tenure Security project (WOLTS) team in Mongolia. What a great session!

While heading there, and over the course of the following days, with inspiration from all the sessions I attended, I reflect a lot on everything we achieved with WOLTS – and how much still remains to be done!

A month later, on the other side of the globe, my Mokoro colleague, Christopher Tanner, is talking about how we apply political economy in practice within our WOLTS approach to empowering community Gender and Land Champions, men and women. It's another glorious morning, May 6th, this time in the Washington D.C. spring. Chris is at the World Bank Land Conference 2025 on a panel about 'Navigating Political Economies to Strengthen Land Governance for Climate Action'. As Chris points out, WOLTS has shown how community-led dialogue can shift entrenched social norms and promote more inclusive land tenure when women are supported to become decision-makers with voice and power alongside men.

My focus at FIG Working Week is the collaboration in Mongolia of the Gender and Land Champions with the WOLTS team and the Mongolian National Land Agency, ALAMGAC, to develop a set of 'Gender Guidelines' to strengthen the government's existing methodology for medium-term participatory landscape development in rural districts. In both Mongolia and Tanzania, peer-to-peer engagement has also seen trained champions catalyze behaviour change among their own and neighbouring communities with great effect.

My reflections at FIG Working Week inspire me to ask my WOLTS colleagues in Tanzania to check in on the longer-term impact of our work in the pilot communities. I am curious if our work has become truly sustainable after our engagement phased out. The results are beyond exciting!

Looking back 2 years, since our last flagship report was published, we hear that in the run up to national elections later in 2025, women champions have been mobilising women and girls over 18 to register to vote, ready to elect the leaders of their choice and take chances to compete for political positions at village and ward levels. Three of the trained women champions are interested in running for ward council special seats (reserved for women candidates under Tanzania's electoral laws). A good number of men champions, as well as being traditional Maasai leaders, have been elected to local positions including Ward Land Tribunal, Village Land Committee, Village Adjudication Committee, and Village Council. The presence of men champions on these local institutions has led to more allocations of business plots to women and the most vulnerable community members than was ever previously the case.

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Beyond politics, we hear that women champions in Mundarara took the initiative to establish a Women's Baraza (tribunal), which meets bi-monthly and deals with issues of gender-based violence (GBV), girls' education, and the rights of women to participate in politics and contribute to village meetings. Women champions report that, since the WOLTS training programme, they are frequently invited to speak on gender issues in Village Council meetings, and to attend meetings whenever visitors come to the community – not just to raise women's concerns but to ensure women are not left behind on any issue facing the community.

Men champions in Tanzania are continuing to advocate loudly for women's land rights, girls' education, and an end to GBV, in traditional leaders' meetings and official discussions. They also get involved in mediation of land conflicts, including one case between a community and wildlife hunting investor where they used the opportunity to rebuke the investor's oppressive practices that jeopardise community interests (such as corruption, bribery, and trying to use government leaders as their shields). One champion vigorously insisted that each party should live and benefit from their rights as stipulated in the laws, regardless of marital status, gender, religion and beliefs. Trained Gender and Land Champions are also using the knowledge they acquired through WOLTS in negotiating corporate social responsibility contributions with new mining investors, including to improve social services such as health facilities, security in the community by building a police post, and providing mining rubbles (tailings) to women to uplift them economically.

On top of this, my colleagues in Tanzania hear how, across the pilot communities, men – especially, but not only, younger men, age 25-35 – are increasingly supporting their wives to perform roles that were traditionally considered as 'women's work'. This includes collecting water, taking young children to monthly health clinics, and buying firewood for the family to reduce their wives' workload and risk of encountering fierce wild animals. These changes particularly speak to the catalyzing behaviour change role of the WOLTS training programme, and its long-term success in shifting entrenched social norms.

I have argued before that, while our WOLTS work has clearly made a lasting impact at the local level, the potential for much more substantial change through scaling out and over time is tremendous. This requires funding – admittedly a tough call in current times. All sectors within international development are competing for a smaller global pool of funds – so why invest in land governance at local level? The reason is clear, as Chris said in Washington – sustainable change must be "driven by communities themselves". WOLTS offers a thoroughly tried and tested approach to building the capacity and confidence of communities to drive their own development through the entry point of strengthening local land governance and management. What could be more relevant for climate action and gender-transformative social norm change than that?

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