



How WOLTS champions changed communities, and changed me

Building a sustainable model for women and community land rights

By Elizabeth Daley

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When [WOLTS](#) started in October 2015, we had three aims. First, we wanted to deliver stronger evidence on threats to women's land rights. Second, we wanted to strengthen community, civil society and local government capacity to protect women's land rights and govern land in a participatory, inclusive and gender-equitable way. Third, we wanted to show real gains in women's land rights in project communities and beyond. It was a tall order, and from the start we planned a long-term, action-oriented approach.

Looking back after more than seven years, I feel proud that we have achieved so much of what we set out to do. Together, colleagues from [Mokoro](#) (UK), [HakiMadini](#) (Tanzania) and [PCC](#) (Mongolia) have amassed a wealth of data on threats to the land rights of women and vulnerable people and developed effective ways to address them, by working with women and men and across communities at all levels.

Stage 1 of WOLTS started with detailed, participatory research at the intersection of gender, land, mining and pastoralism in pilot communities in both [Mongolia](#) and [Tanzania](#). It was action-research, with strong emphasis on validating results with communities directly and seeking guidance from them on what they needed. A key outcome of Stage 1 was the demand for relevant skills and information, the latter in clear, understandable formats, to empower communities to defend their rights and take charge of their own land and natural resource governance.

We delivered this in Stage 2, by developing and testing a community-driven [gender and land champions training programme](#). The programme was reflexive and iterative, and made extensive use of methods such as role-plays where gender roles were often reversed, with highly impactful results. Seeing traditional leaders, invariably men, playing the part of homeless widows in Tanzania was eye-opening for everyone! The [champions were nominated by their own communities](#) and included respected men and women of all ages and from all sections of each community. Over time they formed close bonds and took increasing ownership of local actions for change. We emphasised sharing of knowledge about relevant laws and regulations and brainstormed with the champions about practical ways to do this. We also encouraged the champions to support community members and leaders on all land governance issues.

By the end of Stage 2 we felt confident we had a proven approach and methodology that was ready to scale up. In the pilot communities where gender and land champions training took place, women's participation in land governance and community decision-making significantly increased in a relatively short time. We found that improving women's land rights also protects the community's land, and we delivered an almost 50% increase in awareness of key land- and gender-related laws among men and women champions through the training. Our engagement with these communities – and the improved understanding it has encouraged about land rights and gender equity – has had a ripple effect on gender-based violence and broader gendered social norms, particularly as men's attitudes have changed. It has also had an indirect impact on women's



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economic empowerment through its effects on women's confidence.

In October 2021 we embarked on Stage 3, an extended period of dissemination. This was a key feature of the WOLTS strategy – taking much more time than most projects to promote our findings and engaging the champions themselves in this process. Our aim was to continue learning how to successfully build critical mass for sustainable locally-driven change. We did so by elevating the voices of the champions beyond their communities. A key lesson from Stage 3 is that impactful dissemination and capacity building take time, but are very possible with strong commitment, sensitive facilitation and nurturing. The champions developed their own stories and messages, and local ownership increased as they chose who to speak for them and what to share with others from their collective experience. We saw fresh evidence of the [champions becoming further empowered as confident actors for change](#) and as influential local advisors, with leadership skills growing as they responded to community demands for action on land and gender issues and drove forward change in social norms. Our overall WOLTS approach and iterative methodology also [strengthened cross-project learning and skill-sharing](#), for champions, communities, team members, partner organisations and [local and regional governments](#).

The communities were grateful for the passion and industry of the WOLTS team. I can't say it any better than one of our Tanzanian champions: "I was surprised to see how committed the WOLTS team are, they had very short time to rest despite the tiresome work of the day. Every time I come across them, they are making office calls, writing reports, correspondence, after work reflections etc."^[1] A Village Councillor who took part in our feedback survey at the end of Stage 3 commented on how much she enjoyed hearing from a female champion. She had almost given up hope of reducing land conflicts in her own community but noted that the champion was unflagging in her efforts, "using different platforms including at water points, rubble collection sites, women council meetings etc., to create awareness among other women about their rights and about the procedures to follow in case their rights are violated."^[2]

In Mongolia, WOLTS was able to bring some of the champions to a joint workshop with ALAMGAC, the Mongolian national land agency, where they shared their stories and experiences as gender and land champions and joined in participatory exercises and role-plays. One senior land officer said afterwards what a positive experience it had been, and how much she had learned: "During the role-play we did with the champions, most of the land experts found some solutions on how to include disabled people, and how to reach out to locals more widely using champions as their supporters. It felt good to meet the champions in person. I wish I could have such active champions in my region!"^[3] Indeed, in Tanzania, the demand for gender and land champions in villages the champions visited was overwhelming.

The reason for the strong demand is because of the results WOLTS has achieved. The WOLTS approach works to deliver [sustainable change in land rights](#) and gender equity at the community level. Trained men and women champions work side by side. In Tanzania, men champions encourage other men to protect women's rights and demonstrate changed attitudes through their own examples – speaking up about land rights for childless women, [taking women to traditionally men-only meetings](#) and insisting they be allowed to speak, [supporting every woman that asks for their help to apply for land in her own name](#). In Mongolia, men champions speak out about gender-based violence and the vulnerability to mining companies of remote herding households headed by elderly widows. In Tanzania, [women champions support other women](#), and set an example by [sharing platforms with men champions and demonstrating their confidence](#) and eloquence to share knowledge and articulate their rights. In Mongolia, [women and men champions are working together to mobilise their entire community](#) to take [successful action at the national level](#) against mining company abuses.

What we have learned after more than seven years is that the seed we planted with WOLTS has grown in ways we could not always foresee. WOLTS empowers both men and women, builds capacity and local ownership, and [offers a sustainable approach to securing land rights and challenging gendered social norms](#). Our experience underlines how a long-term, action-oriented approach is crucial to sustainable success and achieving real change. What I have learned personally is how amazingly adaptable, resilient, warm, hospitable and uplifting the people in the communities we have worked in are. Above all, the WOLTS experience has given me hope for the future. Change is possible, maybe even inevitable, if we never stop learning and sharing and growing.

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[1] Unpublished quote from feedback survey data, February 2023. [2] Sinonik Village Councillor, cited in Daley, E. et al, *Confident Gender and Land Champions*, forthcoming 2023, p.23. [3] Dundgobi Aimag Land Officer, cited in *Confident Gender and Land Champions*, op. cit., pp. 14 and 22.