

What is the impact of LIFT interventions on women's security of land tenure?

Second level land certification (SLLC) – a land registration system led by the Land Investment for Transformation (LIFT) programme – aims to improve security of land tenure for smallholder farmers in Ethiopia. But how does it impact on female landholders? To find out, LIFT looked at threats to women's land rights, how SLLC promotes gender equality among rural landholders, and whether its measures are working in practice.

Background

Rural women in Ethiopia, and across Africa in general, typically experience more difficulties than men in achieving security of land tenure – because of legal restrictions, cultural conventions or both. As such, improvements in women's land rights are recognised by the international development community as a key indicator of sustainable development: the United Nations uses the measure in two of its Sustainable Development Goals; and the African Union states that, by 2050, 30% of all certified landholdings should be registered in a woman's name.

Through its SLLC, the LIFT programme has been working to improve security of land tenure for all Ethiopian landholders, women included. Unlike its predecessor – first level land certification – SLLC incorporates a 'gender equality and social inclusion strategy'. By applying this strategy to SLLC interventions, LIFT aimed for 70% of 14 million parcels of land in more than 140 woredas (districts) to be jointly or individually held by women. To find out whether the strategy and interventions have been successful, LIFT carried out a comprehensive review.

Methodology

To synthesise knowledge on protecting women's land rights in SLLC, LIFT reviewed studies previously commissioned by the programme. The research team also analysed qualitative and quantitative data generated in the four regions in which LIFT operates: Oromia, Tigray, Amhara and the Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples' Region (SNNPR). Out of the 11.5 million parcels of land that LIFT had demarcated across the four regions (as of February 2019), the research team reviewed 7.1 million certified parcels.

Key insights

- Although the Constitution of Ethiopia recognises gender equality, and statutory law accords women equal rights with men with regard to land tenure, most property in Ethiopia is acquired by inheritance under customary rules, which favour male heirs.
- There is a lack of large-scale and/or long-duration studies on both the threats to women's security of land tenure and the effectiveness of interventions in addressing these threats.
- As the orchestrator of SLLC, and as a programme equipped to commission comprehensive research studies, LIFT is uniquely positioned to address this knowledge gap.



Research findings

What are the threats and barriers to women's land rights?

The LIFT review of studies previously commissioned found that some barriers to land rights affected women regardless of their age, family position or experience. For example, legal illiteracy and limited knowledge about procedures for resolving land disputes were obstacles for many women. Similarly, low levels of awareness of how women can participate in, and benefit from, SLLC, were commonplace. But while all women faced challenges with regard to security of land tenure, in some respects the experience varied among different groups, as outlined below.

Women in male-headed households

The LIFT studies documented how women in male-headed households can lose their land rights through marriage, divorce and widowhood. In some cases, husbands used deceptive practices to exclude their wife from joint certification – such as lying about their marital status or removing their wife's photograph from the landholding book, or even bribing a kebele administration to remove their wife's land rights. Women in male-headed households were also deterred from accessing public information about SLLC: their husbands tended to have full control over administrative processes and household resources.



Women in polygamous marriage

According to the Ethiopian Demographic and Health Survey 2016, 14% of married women in the country are in polygamous marriages. Legally, polygamy is neither wholly outlawed nor wholly approved. As a result, the registration of land rights for women in polygamous relationships is not backed by any legal principles or procedures, and is prone to abuse. For example, the LIFT research identified that husbands sometimes favoured one wife over another – who then tended to lose out on land rights as a result.

Female heads of household

The LIFT studies showed that, for female-headed households, boundary encroachment was the most common form of land rights violation, even when a SLLC certificate was in place. Taking judicial action against such encroachment was not easy for the women heading these households: these women might be illiterate, have limited knowledge of land boundaries or be unaccustomed to public speaking and explaining a case in court.

Female siblings and widows

The LIFT studies documented how a customary preference for sons as heirs meant that young women were unlikely to inherit land. Furthermore, widows' land rights were negatively impacted by religious and customary practices or by the unrecorded transfer of land as a gift.



How has LIFT promoted land rights for women?

In accordance with the gender equality and social inclusion strategy of the LIFT programme, the SLLC carried out six interventions aimed at supporting female landholders and protecting their land rights. These initiatives are outlined below.

Amending communication materials

LIFT mainstreamed gender issues into the SLLC manual so that it specifically considered the rights of women landholders and provided appropriate advice. The programme also endeavoured to address issues affecting women landholders in all its other communication materials and public awareness-raising activities.

Introducing Social Development Officers

After piloting a Social Development Officer (SDO) position in six woredas in the three regions (Amhara, Oromia and SNNPR), LIFT scaled up the practice to every woreda in which SLLC operated. These officers were responsible for conducting public awareness activities for all landholders, particularly targeted towards women and other information-marginalised groups. They also identify more vulnerable women early in the process to make sure that their interests are protected during SLLC. As a result, public meetings were decentralised and held more locally, with additional women-only meetings held separately. SDOs were instrumental in facilitating dispute resolution which helped many women to reinstate lost parcels or encroached boundaries.

Training field staff on women's land rights

LIFT integrated information on women's land rights, and how they should be protected, into training programmes provided to staff working in the field. For example, LIFT trained field teams on how to create a safe space for women so that they could freely discuss a dispute without fear of retaliation from other parties. In addition, LIFT encouraged field workers to work closely with SDOs to support women who might be vulnerable to land rights violations, during adjudication/demarcation and the public display stage of the SLLC.

Engaging with local stakeholders

By establishing steering committees in each woreda where SLLC was operating, LIFT brought together local government, courts, elders, support groups and community representatives. These steering committees

provided a forum for engaging with stakeholders on women's land rights and the challenges faced by female landholders. In addition, prior to commencing SLLC, LIFT held in each woreda a workshop that explained how SLLC can help women overcome challenges to their land rights.

Improving SLLC procedures

In order to address the low participation of women landholders compared to men in the SLLC process, LIFT amended several procedures and requirements of the certification programme. For example, women's attendance during public display events was made mandatory: if a wife was not present, the husband needed to provide documentary evidence as to why.

Protecting the land rights of women in polygamous marriages

After conducting a study in 2017, LIFT amended SLLC requirements to include two procedural options for registering the land rights of polygamous households. Under the first, a husband chooses one wife to register as a joint holder, while the other wives register independently; under the second, all wives and the husband register their land rights separately. This clarification aimed to prevent future conflicts involving the land rights of polygamous wives.



Are LIFT's interventions working for female landholders?

Evidence from quantitative data

Analysis of gender-disaggregated data revealed that LIFT has been very **successful in its efforts to increase the number of women engaged in the SLLC process**: 80% of SLLC certificates showed a woman's name in Amhara and Oromia, 78% in SNNPR and 69% in Tigray.

Quantitative analysis also revealed no statistically significant difference between male and female landholders with regard to the mean size of their parcel of land. This demonstrates that there is **no major gender inequality based on holding size** within the woredas in which SLLC operates. In addition, of the holdings registered in one name only (as opposed to joint ownership between a husband and a wife), more land was registered to a female rather than a male landholder. This shows that there is currently **no discrimination against women in terms of the area of land under their tenure**.



Evidence from qualitative data

Qualitative evidence gathered by the LIFT programme through its various research studies suggests that LIFT's interventions have resulted in:

- **Greater women's participation in SLLC**, through better access to SLLC information via meetings held locally and for women only, and increased participation of women in the processes of adjudication, demarcation and public display.
- **Fewer land rights violations**, and increased engagement of women in reporting and resolving land disputes.
- **Improved processes for resolving land disputes**. As of June 2019, SDOs helped 1,065 vulnerable landholders (64% women) to resolve disputes on 1,944 parcels of land (68% under the tenure of female landholders).
- **Reduced violence against women in the programme woredas**. The public nature of SLLC, and increased participation of women in SLLC processes, has freed many women from violence related to land rights.

Overall, LIFT's attempts to make the SLLC process work better for female landholders has been successful. Given that customary practices favouring men's inheritance rights over women's were prevalent before SLLC, the fact that women now have greater security of land tenure and are fully involved in SLLC shows that LIFT's interventions have played a key role in making women's land rights more robust in Ethiopia.



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About the Research Summary series

This series summarises key research by the UK Department for International Development (DFID)-funded Land Investment for Transformation (LIFT) programme. LIFT aims to improve the incomes of the rural poor in Ethiopia by securing the land rights of households through second level land certification (SLLC); improving rural land administration systems (RLAS); and increasing productivity by leveraging SLLC through a 'making markets work for the poor' (M4P) approach, in Oromia, Amhara, the Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples' Region (SNNPR) and Tigray regions.

This summary is based on the following report: Hailu, Z., Mekonen, W., Savolainen, G. & Leckie, J. 2019. *Protecting Land Tenure Security of Women in Ethiopia*. Research was commissioned by LIFT but does not necessarily reflect the views of DFID.