How Big is Global Insecurity of Tenure?

World Statistics Day, as declared by the United Nations Statistical Commission, was celebrated on 20 October 2015. Official statistics are crucial to help decision-makers develop informed policies that impact millions of people. Improved data sources, sound statistical methods, new technologies and strengthened statistical systems enable better decisions that eventually result in better lives for us all. One of the #StatsDay15 tweets highlighted that “70% of the world’s population have no access to formal land administration services and have no security of tenure”.

This particular statistic both intrigued and worried me since I know the source of the figure.

It intrigued me because I obtained the statistic from Willie Zimmermann who, in conjunction with UN-FAO, took an educated guess at the figure. I then published the statistic with a caveat in my ‘Crowdsourcing Support of Land Administration’ paper in 2011. That statistic has now become a de facto standard that is quoted globally. Most people are surprised by the extent of global insecurity of tenure and the headline figure is very effective at raising awareness and support for global land issues.

However, it also worried me because this statistic is the best that we have. The land sector has not been good at monitoring progress of the global initiatives in fighting insecurity of land governance and tenure, but now there is no hiding. Solving land issues is on the radar of the G8, has been reflected in the adopted Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure and, after a successful lobbying campaign, land is integrated into the post-2015 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This tenuous 70% statistic highlights the challenge for the land sector to design and implement global land indicators and monitoring frameworks associated with land governance and land tenure security that are based on feasible data sources and data collection strategies. Even agreeing a global set of concepts and definitions is problematic!

Traditional sources of data, e.g. administrative data, national census and household surveys and global polls, to support land indicators for national statistical systems are currently limited, expensive and do not normally have the outreach to the most vulnerable. New, innovative sources of data need to be explored to create a much more comprehensive and meaningful set of statistics that are technically feasible, politically acceptable and obtain stakeholder ownership. Smartphones, satellite imagery, social media and the ‘Internet of Things’ are continuously generating data everywhere, faster and more detailed than ever before. These technologies offer new measurement opportunities and challenges for the land sector.

A number of innovative land tenure initiatives are using this new technology and encouraging citizens and communities to directly record their evidence of land rights on global platforms, outside of the formal land administration systems. Cadasta Foundation is developing a global platform to record and manage crowdsourced land rights, for example, and Rights Resource Initiative is creating a global baseline of indigenous and community land rights. Pervasive smartphones could be used to capture perceptions on insecurity of tenure across populations not included in official statistics. However, their success in closing the land information gap is dependent upon convincing citizens to trust these solutions and understand the benefits of participation. Privacy and security of information is paramount. If not managed effectively, these sources of information will be switched off.

These are the challenges facing the Global Land Indicator Initiative meeting in Nairobi, Kenya, in November 2015 to find solutions to better our de facto 70%.

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