

Is There Momentum for Change in Land Administration?



Every day, newspaper front pages carry headlines about injustice, disasters, conflicts, inequity, war and refugees. Updates on the progress made towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals tend to be an issue for somewhere around page 12, or even the next day's edition. The value of good land administration appears to be even further towards the back of people's minds. For most citizens and decision-makers worldwide, cadastres and registries are associated with words like 'boring' and 'bureaucracy'. But is there momentum for change?

(By Kees de Zeeuw, Kadaster International, The Netherlands)

I sense change. People are starting to analyse and better understand how things are interlinked in society. Short-term problems (our newspaper headlines) relate to mid-term solutions (Sustainable Development Goals) and long-term developments (land administration). They should now be brought into sync, making land rights for the world a conditional factor in global, national and regional development. Is something new happening in land administration? Is there momentum for change?

I believe there is – and that's not only because of my optimistic nature! It is also being underlined by upcoming initiatives. The United Nations is recognising the importance of good land administration and management by putting the issue on the agenda. The final declaration of the UN-GGIM High Level Forum in Addis Ababa is a major step in this respect, and is commendable to read. National governments and civil communities are launching initiatives to recognise land rights for all and registering these rights both top-down and bottom-up – from Togo to Mozambique and from Cuba to Indonesia. Donor organisations and countries in the north are also taking action by relating trade and aid to people's land rights. And let's not forget the private sector. The Open Geospatial Consortium (OGC) has set up a domain group on land administration and new (and young) entrepreneurs are entering the arena, spotting business opportunities in land administration. This means that it's time to act. Land rights should be recognised and registered and used in a proper way. There's no time to lose and no money to waste.

We have a very good starting point, since much has been achieved already. The present availability technology and data is a great help. Satellite imagery, GPS and a world connected by the internet open up new opportunities that were unimaginable just a few decades ago. Standards like the Land Administration Domain Model (LADM) are helping to jump-start new initiatives and are connecting top-down and bottom-up projects together. Not only that, but the necessary knowledge and experience is in place too. The Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests (VGGT) and the recently published Guiding Principles on Fit-For-Purpose Land Administration allow for well-designed systems with respect to the legal, spatial and institutional framework.

This means we are being challenged to live up to society's expectations. And yes, there are still important issues to overcome. There is a clear need for more capacity and best practices to inspire one another. Political awareness, financing and leadership are ongoing points of concern, so there should be no loss of momentum or focus. And let me add the issue of inclusiveness. It is all about land rights for all: not only for the chosen few, not only for the elite, not only for the rich, but for everyone.