



ALIGN

Advancing Land-based Investment Governance



Governance Flash

Women's meaningful participation in community engagements for land-based investments

Too often, when governments and investors engage with affected people about land investments, women are overlooked and ignored. Even their physical presence at meetings does not automatically mean that women – and the many diverse subgroups of women – are able to *meaningfully* engage or have decision-making power. Women's meaningful participation in community engagements is crucial for responsible, legally compliant and successful investments to the benefit of governments, investors and communities alike.

What is the problem?

Community engagement is at the core of responsible land-based investment. International law and good practice require that government officials and potential investors engage communities about any activities that will affect them and their land. Communities are individuals, families and households who collectively live within or have strong historical ties to a specific, defined territory and are governed by a shared set of Indigenous, customary or state governance structures.

Relationship building or 'engagement' with an affected community by outsiders (for example, government officials and company representatives) may be through capacity building and education, social impact assessments, consultation, negotiations, agreement making, and the design and implementation of grievance mechanisms. For Indigenous Peoples, obtaining a community's Free, Prior and Informed Consent is a legal requisite.

Done well, engagement is ongoing, open to all, and makes community members feel comfortable. It takes place in a location of the community's choice, and is conducted in the local language and according to local cultural protocols.

Around the world, women – including people who identify as female, and girls who are younger than 18 years old who already bear household responsibilities tied to land use – are commonly excluded from meaningful participation in community engagements. This is due to underlying causes and specific barriers (see **Box 1**).

Why is this important to governments?

Community engagements can be an opportunity to support women to share their wisdom and shape the project in question to the benefit of the entire community. Governments and investors alike have a vested interest in meaningfully including women in community engagements because doing so:

Box 1: Barriers women face to meaningful participation in community engagements and their underlying causes

Underlying causes

- Sociocultural norms and practices (and a lack of legal mandate) determine what women are or are not allowed or expected to do
- Men may fear that they will lose power if women gain power
- Increased competition for scarce land, water and natural resources may cause communities to exclude more women from community membership

Specific barriers

- Meeting times and venues may exclude women
- Women may not know that meetings are happening or may not have access to information to understand why it is in their interests to attend
- Women may feel that they cannot or should not attend meetings about land where land ownership runs patrilineally or they are not from an elite family
- It may not be safe for women to attend meetings where

- husbands refuse to allow their wives to interact with other men outside of the family, where speaking up publicly may lead to social ostracisation, or where leaving their home or travelling may expose women to gender-based violence
- Intersectionalities¹ may make it even harder for certain women to participate
- Women may be afraid, uncomfortable, or not allowed to speak in front of men
- Women are not listened to by men, who undervalue their land- and natural resource-related expertise
- Men are relied on as proxies for women but do not actually represent women's interests, leaving women little opportunity to share their opinions and perspectives
- During meetings, facilitators do not ask women the right questions, or any questions at all, resulting in a lack of nuanced understanding of women's priorities and the ways a project will impact women's lives
- Male leaders may make final decisions on the community's behalf

1. Is more likely to improve local development outcomes (such as poverty eradication and food security) by increasing community land tenure security and protecting diverse livelihood strategies
2. Will enhance the overall success and sustainability of an investment, and
3. Complies with legal obligations (of the state) and responsibilities (of the investor).

What should governments do?

Governments should implement community engagement policies and protocols that target women's meaningful participation, and require businesses to do the same. For women to **meaningfully participate**, they must:



Be **PRESENT** at community engagements – including understanding the content of engagements and being at meetings in large numbers,



Have **VOICE** to speak up (in ways that feel comfortable to them), be listened to, and have their ideas, opinions and interests taken into consideration, and



Have the **POWER** to influence community decision making and play a role in community–outsider engagements, such as consultations and negotiations.

Governments can make use of ALIGN's Toolkit: *Enhancing Women's Meaningful Participation in Community Engagements* to unpack the barriers women are facing in specific contexts and design strategies to overcome them, and to support community engagement planning. The toolkit offers a strong starting point, but the real value add will come from having conversations with a diverse range of individuals in communities, understanding local context, taking time and building trust.

Want to know more?

Bulman, A, Berger, T and Knight, R (2025) *Enhancing Women's Meaningful Participation in Community Engagements: Toolkit*. CCSI and IIED.

Get in touch!

We welcome conversation on this topic. If you have information or ideas to share, contact Anna Bulman (amb2407@columbia.edu), Thierry Berger (thierry.berger@iied.org) and Rachael Knight (Rachael.Knight@iied.org).

ALIGN supports governments, civil society, communities and peoples, and other relevant actors in strengthening the governance of land-based investments. The project is implemented by a consortium led by the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED), the Columbia Center on Sustainable Investment (CCSI) and Namati, and is funded with UK International Development from the UK government.

Find out more: www.iied.org/align-advancing-land-based-investment-governance
Contact: align@align.org

Note

¹A way of describing the interconnected nature of social categories like race, class and gender as they apply to a given individual or group – specifically how these categories create overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage.

ALIGN Governance Flash: a series of short guidance notes designed to alert government officials of critical land-based investment governance considerations and possible responses to issues that might be falling through the cracks, leading to conflicts and poor outcomes.

This Governance Flash has been produced by CCSI and IIED as part of ALIGN, however the views expressed do not necessarily reflect the official views or policies of ALIGN partners or the UK government.

