CASE STUDY

Ethiopia, Lao PDR, and Uganda: Multi-Stakeholder Grievance Fora for Responsible Land-Based Investments

OVERVIEW

Submitting Organization	Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH – Global Programme Responsible Land Policy https://www.giz.de/en
Type of Grievance Mechanism	Business-led grievance mechanism
Level of Operation	Multiple / Hybrid
Geographic Scope	Ethiopia, Lao PDR, Uganda (global relevance)

SYNOPSIS

The case study highlights GIZ's Responsible Governance of Investment in Land (RGIL) project in Ethiopia, Lao PDR, and Uganda, which introduced multi-stakeholder grievance and dialogue mechanisms to manage land-related disputes in agricultural investments. The initiative operationalized international standards on responsible agricultural investment (RAI) through participatory, inclusive, and locally anchored processes. By linking communities, investors, civil society, and authorities in structured dialogue, the mechanisms improved relationships, strengthened compliance with the Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests in the Context of National Food Security (VGGT) and the CFS Principles for Responsible Agricultural Investment (CFS-RAI).[1]

BACKGROUND

In Ethiopia, Lao PDR, and Uganda, insecure access to land continues to affect rural livelihoods, particularly for women and marginalized groups. Weak tenure security leaves communities vulnerable to displacement and limits investment in smallholder farming. The absence of robust safeguards has also enabled investors to acquire land through lease or purchase without adequate Environmental and Social Impact Assessments (ESIA).

At the local level, many investments proceeded without Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) or fair compensation, leading to recurrent disputes. Dialogue among investors, communities, CSOs, and authorities was limited, leaving communities with few opportunities to voice their interests and investors with limited capacity to apply national and international standards on responsible land management.

[1] Engaging the private sector in responsible agricultural investment in Uganda, Ethiopia and Laos, Good Practice | Land Portal .

MECHANISM

To address these gaps, *GIZ's Responsible Governance of Investment in Land (RGIL) project*—under the *Global Programme Responsible Land Policy* and co-financed by the *European Union (EU)*—established local grievance and dialogue mechanisms in the three countries. The initiative aimed to strengthen responsible agricultural investment (RAI) practices by embedding inclusive processes for accountability and conflict prevention within investment contexts. Partners included national investment authorities and the Ministries of Agriculture, Land, and Environment, supported by local and national CSOs facilitating community participation.

The mechanisms were developed through a participatory approach, building on ongoing land governance activities and applying FPIC principles to ensure fair representation of women, youth, and marginalized groups. Governments in all three countries had already aligned national frameworks with the *CFS Principles for Responsible Agricultural Investment (CFS-RAI)* and related safeguards, but lacked operational guidance. The RGIL project addressed this through practical procedures, training, and documentation.

Over five years (2017–2022), the mechanisms evolved through continuous learning, expanding to include customary land certification and support for collective producer groups. Participatory monitoring and multi-stakeholder consultations guided each adjustment.

PROCESS

The grievance process was anchored in multi-stakeholder dialogue structures that included representatives of communities, investors, local government, and civil society.

To facilitate smooth operation of the mechanisms the process began with an agreement between the community and the investor on a monitoring plan—a key tool for ensuring that all parties adhered to their obligations under investment contracts. Outcomes and agreements reached during dialogue sessions were documented in official minutes, providing a written record and accountability tool. Community representatives worked directly with those collecting monitoring data, ensuring that local knowledge informed the process and that evidence was gathered transparently.

Financial and logistical support during facilitation was crucial in the early stages. The RGIL project covered initial costs and supported CSOs to provide mobilization, documentation, and capacity-building for all stakeholders. In Ethiopia, a cost-sharing (contributory) model was piloted, whereby private-sector participants contributed to facilitation expenses. In Laos and Uganda, the grievance mechanisms were integrated into local government budget cycles.

In operational terms, the grievance mechanisms were jointly managed by CSOs and local authorities, often with the participation of investment agencies. Grievances were typically raised either:

- during investor monitoring missions, or
- directly by community members during multi-stakeholder dialogue meetings.

The initiation of meetings could come from any party—government, civil society, investors, or communities—depending on who identified the need. In some cases, local cooperatives assumed a coordinating or governing role.

The duration of grievance processing varied depending on case complexity—from a single meeting for minor disputes to multiple sittings over the course of a year, accompanied by regular follow-up and monitoring.

Local Resolution First, with Formal Pathways When Needed

While primarily community-based and informal in nature, the mechanism maintained referral pathways to formal administrative and traditional systems for unresolved cases. Owing to the active involvement of local authorities, most disputes were settled at the local level, with recourse to higher courts only rarely required.

OUTCOMES

The establishment and operation of the grievance mechanisms resulted in notable improvements in investor-community relations within the intervention areas. These improvements contributed to greater stability, access to labour, and market linkages for investors, while communities benefited from inclusion in local value chains and from clearer arrangements governing access to natural resources. In cases where investments had restricted such access, agreements reached through the mechanisms enabled restoration under clearly defined rules. The grievance mechanisms became progressively embedded in regional and local development planning processes. Several investors continued to maintain dialogue independently beyond project support, recognizing its value for long-term investment stability and risk management.

Building Capacity for Responsible Land Tenure and Inclusive Investment Dialogue

Approximately **200 investors across Ethiopia, Laos, and Uganda** participated in training, coaching, and advisory services to strengthen compliance with national and international frameworks—particularly the VGGT and CFS-RAI.

In the pilot regions, about **4,600 land users or their representatives took part in community–investor dialogue fora, at least 20 percent of whom were women.**

LESSONS LEARNED

The effectiveness of the mechanisms was supported by several enabling conditions:

- The buy-in of all participating actors, based on shared recognition of the mechanism's relevance for addressing grievances and stabilizing investment environments;
- The sustainability of dialogue processes, supported through contributions from both government and private actors; and
- The presence of a dedicated secretariat or process owner responsible for organizing meetings, documenting agreements, and ensuring accountability for implementation.

Nevertheless, the process encountered several challenges. Chief among these were:

- Funding constraints, as regular dialogue meetings required ongoing financial resources;
- The mechanisms were better suited to long-term relationship building than to the resolution of ad hoc or urgent disputes;
- The need for linkages to regulatory enforcement when voluntary grievance resolution failed.

To enhance future performance, stakeholders identified the need for further institutionalization of the mechanisms. Strengthening the connection between grievance mechanisms and investment-monitoring systems was also recommended to ensure systematic follow-up, transparency, and learning.

FURTHER INFORMATION

Global

- Engaging the private sector in responsible agricultural investment in Uganda, Ethiopia and Laos, Good Practice | Land Portal
- Incorporating Responsible Land-Based Investment Principles into Investor Policies and Practices: A Manual for Investors | Land Portal
- Achieving Responsible Land-Based Investments: A manual for communities | Land Portal

Ethiopia

- Good Practice Ethiopia - CIGF | Land Portal
- Community-Investor-Government Fora (CIGF) implementation manual | Land Portal
- Preventing and solving Land based Conflicts that result from large-scale agricultural Investments | Land Portal

Lao PDR

- How to Deal with Investments Affecting your Communities | Land Portal
- Grievance Redress Mechanisms for Communities in Lao PDR | Land Portal
- Responsible Agricultural and Forestry Investments: How to Set Up Company-based Grievance Mechanisms | Land Portal

Uganda

- How to Understand and Address Land Conflicts | Land Portal