

Rights plus action: 2015 update

Systems of rights, and how they are exercised, are changing. New rights are created as existing rights are eroded. The process of agreeing and realising rights raises questions around who defines them, and on whose behalf. Rights increasingly compete. Some people cannot secure their rights, while others fail to meet their responsibilities. There is growing demand for development that combines policy, capacity and organisational support to ensure everyone can exercise their rights and fulfil their responsibilities. We will focus on strengthening the voices of non-state actors — from federations of urban dwellers and rural producers to civil society and citizens’ groups — so that they can shape land and natural resource rights, access to water, and investment law and practices affecting natural resources.

Citizens’ groups, grassroots organisations and social movements, local and central governments, producer associations, farmers, forest dwellers and fishers, and private companies are all asking us to take a lead in developing an ambitious ‘rights plus action’ agenda. They want an agenda that combines recognition of rights with policy, capacity and organisational support to ensure rights can be exercised and realised, and corresponding responsibilities can be fulfilled. We will work in partnership with them to assess where our research and action has the greatest potential to deliver change.

Our work seeks to bridge rights discourses and practical action — ensuring that international ‘rights’ processes are informed by local realities, backed up by grounded action and accompanied by clear responsibilities for realising rights in practice; and that action on the ground fully harnesses the potential of rights discourses, approaches, tools and tactics.

Achieving change will be most likely where we have established relationships with partners. We will focus on several low- and lower-middle income countries in Asia and Africa where there is scope to work well with non-governmental organisations, universities, multilateral organisations and think tanks, and with journalists and parliamentarians.

Within the next four years

We aim to:

- Work with partners in low-income and informal urban settlements to understand the challenges and opportunities of realising the rights to basic services. We will consider how governments and utilities have tended to overlook questions of affordability in favour of full cost recovery when improving access to water services, and how water pricing strategies can work to include or exclude low-income households and communities.
- Balance rights and responsibilities in international investment processes that affect natural resources in low- and middle-income countries, including in relation to land and resource rights, the negotiation of investment treaties and advancing the business and human rights agenda. We will do this by documenting better practice, facilitating lesson sharing among civil society, supporting low- and middle-income country governments to make and implement better policy and aiming to influence global debates.