



Report

The VGGT: An opportunity for co-operatives and producer organisations to engage in improving governance of tenure

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1. Introduction

The International Co-operative Alliance (Alliance) encourages co-operatives to be more involved in tenure issues in order to empower their members and employees in securing their resources and livelihoods. As part of this effort, the Alliance acknowledges the [*Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests in the Context of National Food Security \(VGGT\)*](#) as the international framework to improve governance of tenure and is engaged in their implementation.

The VGGT represent an unprecedented international agreement on the governance of tenure, which places secure access to land, fisheries and forests firmly in the context of food security. The VGGT are an international soft law instrument that is a reference for work to ensure that people benefit from secure and equitable tenure rights. The VGGT were prepared through negotiations by governments of countries from all regions of the world under the auspices of the Committee of World Food Security. The negotiations included participation by representatives of civil society, co-operatives, farmers' organizations, the private sector and research institutes. The VGGT were endorsed by the Committee on World Food Security on 11 May 2012.

In the framework of its Global Conference and General Assembly, the Alliance, in collaboration with the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), hosted an all-day workshop on the VGGT on 10 November 2015. The event aimed at further raising awareness on the VGGT among co-operatives, assessing whether the VGGT can be a useful tool for co-operatives, and implementing and identifying requirements and next steps for their application.

The session brought together 28 participants from 18 countries (Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Canada, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ghana, India, Israel, Italy, Jamaica, Kenya, Maldives, Mongolia, Nepal, Rwanda, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Uruguay). The workshop built on a working draft report on co-operatives and the VGGT distributed in advance of the meeting.

This report will provide a brief introduction to the VGGT and make the case for why and how co-operatives should engage in implementing them. The purpose of this document is to inform co-operatives about the value of engaging in the VGGT implementation process, their potential role and the necessary conditions for that engagement.



2. The VGGT and the tenure debate

For billions of people in the world, their food security depends on their tenure security. Without secure access to land and other natural resources, people can be forced to live a life of hunger and poverty. In contrast, secure tenure rights may help families to produce food for consumption, and to increase their income by producing a surplus for sale in markets. They further act as a valuable safety net in times of hardship and economic instability. However, tenure security often depends on the governance of tenure. Weak governance causes tenure problems, and strongly affects attempts to improve tenure security.

Tenure rights to land and other natural resources are fundamental to food and shelter, elements of social, cultural and religious practices, and underpinnings of economic growth.

In response, FAO and its partners initiated the preparation of an unprecedented international agreement on the governance of tenure that promotes secure tenure rights and equitable access to land, fisheries and forests as a means of eradicating hunger and poverty, supporting sustainable development and enhancing the environment. The Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests in the Context of National Food Security were officially endorsed by the Committee on World Food Security (CFS) on 11 May 2012. Since then implementation has been encouraged by the G8, G20, Rio+ 20, the United Nations General Assembly, and numerous other international, regional and national bodies.

The VGGT serve as a reference and set out principles and internationally accepted standards for practices for the responsible governance of tenure of land, fisheries and forests. They provide a framework that States can use when developing their own strategies, policies, legislation, programmes and activities. They allow governments, civil society, co-operatives, producer organizations, the private sector and citizens to judge whether their proposed actions and the actions of others constitute acceptable practices.

The VGGT seek to improve governance of tenure of land, fisheries and forests. They seek to do so for the benefit of all, with an emphasis on vulnerable and marginalized people, with the goals of food security and progressive realization of the right to adequate food, poverty eradication, sustainable livelihoods, social stability, housing security, rural development, environmental protection and sustainable social and economic development. All programs, policies and technical assistance to improve the governance of tenure through the implementation of these Guidelines should be consistent with States' existing obligations under international law including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international human rights instruments.



The VGGT seek to:

- *Improve tenure governance by providing guidance and information on internationally accepted practices for systems that deal with the rights to use, manage and control land, fisheries and forests.*
- *Contribute to the improvement and development of the policy, legal and organizational frameworks regulating the range of tenure rights that exist over these resources.*
- *Enhance the transparency and improve the functioning of tenure systems.*
- *Strengthen the capacities and operations of implementing agencies; judicial authorities; local governments; organizations of farmers and small-scale producers, of fishers, and of forest users; pastoralists; indigenous peoples and other communities; civil society; private sector; academia; and all persons concerned with tenure governance as well as to promote the cooperation between the actors mentioned.*

The VGGT cover a wide range of topics and concepts that are globally important. Countries will need to identify which topics are most relevant to them and how to initiate action. In some instances, the concepts of the VGGT are felt to provoke a new mind-set of addressing tenure issues and work may start by contextualizing these concepts. The following concepts were found particularly interesting by participants of the workshop.

- The **governance of tenure** is a crucial element in determining if and how people, communities and others are able to acquire rights, and associated duties, to use and control land, fisheries and forests.
- **The term tenure can include but is not limited to ownership:** Tenure is how people gain access to land, fisheries, forests and other natural resources. This can include ownership, but can also refer to other rights a person may legitimately have to a resource (e.g. passage, lease, use) and can vary in its time limitation and seasonality. The VGGT acknowledge all tenure rights and the fact that different rights by different groups or individuals may overlap.
- **Tenure systems** define and regulate how people, communities and others gain access to natural resources, whether through formal law or informal arrangements. The VGGT promote responsible governance of tenure of land, fisheries and forests, with respect to all forms of tenure: public, private, communal, indigenous, customary, and informal.
- **Written policies and laws, and customs:** The VGGT acknowledge that rights may be based on written policies and laws, as well as on unwritten customs and practices, and promote respect towards all legitimate tenure rights.
- **Natural resource sectors:** The VGGT explicitly cover land, fisheries and forests, but do not explicitly address water and other natural resources, such as mineral rights. However, the preface to the VGGT notes that responsible governance of



tenure of land, fisheries and forests is inextricably linked with access to and management of other natural resources, such as water and minerals.

- **Cross-sectoral issues:** Tenure rights to land, fisheries and forests are often interlinked. The livelihoods of many of the rural poor are diversified and are dependent on access to various natural resources (e.g. combining crop agriculture and livestock grazing with fishing and gathering of forest products). The VGGT acknowledge this inter-dependency. Each year, several million hectares of forested land are converted to agriculture and other land uses without prior authorization. This is due to a number of factors including uncertainty regarding forest tenure, weak law enforcement, corruption and lack of transparency.

3. The argument for co-operative engagement

There are several reasons for co-operatives to be involved in the implementation of the VGGT:

- **The relevance (size and scope of co-operatives in agriculture, forestry and fisheries)**

Worldwide, co-operatives have more than 1 billion members. The aim of co-operatives, according to the statement on co-operative identity¹, is to satisfy members' needs and aspirations. According to the latest World Co-operative Monitor², 27% of co-operatives operate in agriculture, forestry and fishing, which makes it the largest sector for co-operative activity. Most of the members of these co-operatives are therefore farmers, foresters and fishermen, people who have daily contact and immediate interest in tenure issues. In Europe, agricultural co-operatives have an overall market share of about 60 percent of the processing and marketing of agricultural commodities and about 50 percent of the supply of inputs; in Brazil, 37 percent of agricultural GDP is produced through co-operatives; in Egypt, 4 million farmers earn their income through co-operative membership; and in Ethiopia the equivalent figure is 900,000.

- **The role (co-operatives are structures for collective power)**

Co-operatives can play an important role in contributing to improved governance of tenure in general and in enhancing tenure security of their members. They can assume a double role as implementers of the VGGT by applying them in their own structures and as advocates for Governments to implement them.

People form co-operatives as a way to manage their economic, social and environmental interests in a collective manner. Doing so allows them to address challenges that they would not or could not address individually. Co-operatives increase the scale of the individual members, giving them more power to negotiate terms and conditions of contracts, prices, access to finance, technology and other areas of interest. The same is true for advocacy and policy issues. Through co-operatives, members can shift the balance of power to better protect their rights

¹ <http://s.coop/1u9j1>

² www.monitor.coop



and interests and this can certainly be the case for the VGGT. Co-operatives empower people in a democratic and collective way.

Within their own extensive networks ranging from small, grassroots associations to apex bodies with a high degree of political influence, co-operatives and producer organizations provide a range of services to holders of tenure rights, including training, information and communication.

- **Broad reach of the co-operative movement**

The very nature of co-operation implies that co-operatives are seldom working alone. They are part of networks as they themselves constitute a network for their members. This principle of co-operation among co-operatives has a unique advantage for the implementation of the VGGT. On the one hand, co-operatives can better learn and exchange experiences with their counterparts and with their local, national, regional and international structures. On the other hand, when implementing the VGGT, co-operatives, being locally rooted, can have a downstream ripple effect, passing information and knowledge to members, their families and their communities.

- **Co-operatives are values-based and people-centred organisations**

Most principles of the VGGT are inherent to the very nature of co-operatives and have been applied for centuries. Therefore, the VGGT have specific implications for co-operatives and producer organizations. While states play a unique role in the development, implementation and enforcement of policy and law, including the administration of tenure, everyone has a role to play in improving governance of tenure. The VGGT can be used by different people and organizations in different ways and in partnership with others. They should help the various actors to better defend their rights while supporting the duties that are related to them.

Last but not least, co-operatives should be involved in the implementation of the VGGT because they are driven by ethical values and principles. The statement on the co-operative identity³ contains the values and principles that all co-operatives share. These include, among others, democracy, solidarity, equality, equity and concern for their communities.

For this reason, several international texts recognise the important contribution co-operatives can provide towards sustainable development. Among them are the ILO Recommendation 193 on the promotion of cooperatives and the recently adopted United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

It is therefore a “natural” fit for co-operatives to be directly involved in the implementation of the VGGT. It is important to look at the challenges and needs of co-operatives with the purpose of finding solutions to making their engagement stronger in practice.

³<http://s.coop/1u9j1>



4. Requirements for co-operatives and potential future actions

The workshop in November 2015 and the questionnaires sent to members of the Alliance allowed the identification of major challenges and needs for co-operatives to be more involved in the discussion and in the implementation of the VGGT. These cover three main areas:

- Awareness raising (at regional, country and district levels). It is important to provide members with information regarding the existence and content of the VGGT to sensitize and mobilize them. This should be done in different languages and using simple and practical examples. Some of the reasons for this seem to be related to the complexity of the language used in the VGGT and in information tools about them. While different tools have been developed to address this issue, such as the Manual Popular, which is specifically designed for grassroots organizations, more tailored and more multilingual material should be developed.
- Capacity development (at regional, country and district levels). It is crucial to strengthen the capacity of co-operative structures to enable them to better participate in decision-making processes regarding the VGGT. This includes co-operative structures themselves and members of co-operatives to ensure a multiplier effect. Actions are needed to develop capacities in a holistic manner to apply the VGGT and to impact policies and procedures (including for youth and women) through dedicated learning programs and through the inclusion of learning programs in co-operative training institutions. Readily available training tools and programmes, which are adapted to the specific nature of co-operatives, would facilitate this effort, with the vast network of training institutions providing a platform to support this endeavour.
- The need to inform co-operatives of existing tools to support the implementation of the VGGT. Several tools, developed by a range of different partners, exist which can support VGGT implementation, such as the FAO Legal Assessment Framework, E-learning programmes and Open Source Software to record tenure rights. The structure of the Alliance could be used to promote the use of these tools.

The following chart summarizes the SWOT analysis completed by the different workshop groups.



<i>STRENGTHS</i>	<i>WEAKNESSES</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Some co-operative members have learned about the VGGT and can be drivers for raising awareness to other members. ▪ Alliance members are best placed to deal with issues on principles and have the capacity to assume a leadership role on different VGGT principles. ▪ The international reach of the co-operative network can help increase visibility of the VGGT in countries. ▪ Legitimacy of co-operatives to address tenure issues when representing a large proportion of communities. ▪ Some co-operatives are committed to working on tenure issues (community involvement of some co-operatives needs to be documented). ▪ The Alliance and its members have developed strong partnerships (e.g. with FAO). ▪ The training network of co-operatives can support the development of capacities to implement the VGGT. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Lack of awareness and capacity to use the VGGT. ▪ Need to increase engagement in implementing the VGGT. ▪ Need for simplified tools in different languages to train members on the VGGT. ▪ Need for advocacy on the VGGT by the Alliance. ▪ Lack of resources.
<i>OPPORTUNITIES</i>	<i>THREATS</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The Alliance and its members can take on a role as advocators and implementers of the VGGT. ▪ The partnership between the Alliance and FAO can be an opportunity to strengthen capacities of members on tenure issues in general and the VGGT in particular. ▪ The workshop organized in Antalya will improve knowledge and information on the VGGT. ▪ The use of social media can be used to expedite trainings and inform Alliance members. ▪ Training materials for civil society could be adapted for co-operatives and producer organizations. ▪ The timeliness of the Sustainable Development Goals, and the global interest in climate change and the social economy, give co-operatives a platform for advocacy. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Challenges around tenure issues can be a threat for members, co-operatives and producer organizations. ▪ The language barrier can be an obstacle to develop training materials for some members. ▪ The lack of adapted training materials for co-operatives and producer organizations can diminish further engagement in advocacy work.



5. Conclusions

The involvement of co-operatives in the discussion and the implementation of the VGGT is a “natural” fit. Co-operatives are values-based and people-centred enterprises and have the potential to deliver impactful initiatives that contribute to the implementation of the VGGT. Considering the challenges in the world today and the way they affect tenure issues, co-operatives in the agriculture, fishery and forestry sectors – and especially their members – will be deeply implicated in the future.

Several initiatives are already taking place led by different stakeholders and, in some, with the active participation of co-operative organizations. Nevertheless, it is time to increase the efforts made by the co-operative movement in partnership with other stakeholders. Co-operatives can and should have a dual role of implementing the VGGT while also representing their members in the discussions regarding the definition of policies towards that implementation.

This report identifies challenges that may be preventing co-operatives from understanding and becoming more involved in the discussion and implementation of the VGGT. Overcoming these will not be easy and will require concerted actions of the Alliance, its members and all other stakeholders, such as national and local governments. There is a clear need for awareness raising and capacity building with tools that are tailored to the nature and specificity of co-operatives.

Alliance members that have engaged in this process and participated in the awareness-raising workshop in Antalya, Turkey have very clearly demonstrated that there is interest and commitment to take this issue forward in a coherent and concerted way.

This report represents therefore the start of a process. The International Co-operative Alliance will continue to work with its members and FAO to overcome the challenges identified.



ANNEXES

Annex 1: Program of the workshop

Annex 2: List of participants



Workshop on the Implementation of the Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests in the context of the National Food Security

Antalya, 10 November 2015

Venue: Maritim Pine Beach Resort

Agenda

8:30 – 9:00	Registration of participants
9:00 – 9:30	Opening <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Salim Zahoueh (FAO Head of Field Unit Programme in Turkey)▪ Fran McCrae (International Cooperative Alliance)
9:30 – 10:30	Presentation of the VGGT <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Leila Shamsaifar (FAO)
10.30 – 11.00	Break
11.00 – 13.00	VGGT principles and their implication for co-operatives and producer organizations <i>Facilitator: Mr Mamadou Goita</i>
13:00 - 14:30	Lunch break
14:30 – 16:00	Cooperative engagement to implement the VGGT <i>Facilitator: Mr Mamadou Goita</i>
16:00 – 17:00	Discussion
17:00 – 17:30	Conclusions and way forward <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Nora Ourabah Haddad (FAO)▪ Fran McCrae (International Cooperative Alliance)



Annex 2: List of participants

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