

Land tenure agreements: a tool to help the landless regain use of the *walo* areas of Maghama

The *walo* is a flood-prone area composed of hollows lying along the left bank of the Mauritanian portion of the Senegal River. The land is owned by a small number of large-scale landowners and it is used by villagers on the basis of traditional land tenure arrangements.

The objective of the first phase of the [Maghama Improved Flood Recession Farming Project](#) was to increase cereal production by introducing improved crops and building flood management works. In addition, the project initiated a process regulating land tenure. During the second phase, the project made significant advances in tenure reform, allowing the most vulnerable groups in the area to gain access to land. The restructuring of the land tenure system was a three-step process. First there was a survey of the social aspects of land tenure. Second, a land agreement was signed. Third, people who previously had no land entitlement were able to enter into the process under favourable conditions. All of this was achieved in a climate of harmony and social solidarity, making the emergence of any conflict unlikely.

The management team of the Maghama Improved Flood Recession Farming Project – Phase I negotiated with landowners and formulated land reallocation arrangements. The arrangements, in the form of land tenure agreements, were signed by the landowners. The agreements granted landless people the right to use the *walo* land. Drawing on the traditional ownership practices, the land tenure agreement guarantees sustainable land access. It is based on principles of justice, solidarity and efficiency, equitable access to flood recession lands, and social cohesion. It also promotes resource-sharing and strengthens the spirit of solidarity traditionally present in rural communities.

Abdelahi Amadou is a 55-year-old formerly landless farmer who has benefited from the land tenure agreements. Married and father of nine children, he served as a soldier in the Mauritanian Army in Nouakchott, where the high cost of living made life difficult. His modest income meant that he could not afford to provide decent living conditions for his large family. He decided to return to his home village to work on the land. “My father owned no land and the scarce resources of the *walo* and the limited availability of cultivable land meant that, before the project, I could not obtain sustained access to a big enough patch of land,” he explained.

For Amadou, rehabilitation of the *waloland* was a stroke of good fortune because it meant that he could cultivate previously unused flood recession lands. Also thanks to the project’s initiatives, he was able to obtain a seven-year renewable agricultural loan. During the last cropping season, he cultivated a four-hectare plot of land and harvested 14 cartloads of sorghum.

The *procès verbal d’insertion* (PVI) is the instrument that ensures application of the land tenure agreements. The PVI is a negotiated and consensus-based document in which the landowner records his agreement to lease a plot of land to a farmer for a definite or indefinite length of time. The minimum term of the lease agreement is seven years, and the lease is renewable. The PVI was the result of participatory surveys on land use, which were undertaken with the active involvement of the population at all stages of the process and were based on a transparent data entry system and on reliable and long-term information. Data compilation and validation were entrusted to the participating stakeholders.

Amadou signed a PVI with the owner of the plot that he farms. “The land use agreements have made my wish come true. With my yield and the sale of by-products, I can now cover my children’s school fees for the entire year and feed the family for six months,” he commented. Thanks to the money he has earned, Amadou has also managed to buy two

goats and purchase a cart on credit. He has already paid off half of this loan. During the rest of the year, when he cannot work because the land is flooded, he supplements his income through small-scale business activities in Nouakchott.

The process leading up to the adoption of the land use agreements took two years. A national committee composed of people originally from Maghama and now living in Nouakchott acted as an interface with administrative authorities and as a facilitator on behalf of the groups involved. During the process, the villages had to organize themselves and set up village committees, with the mandate to discuss, reach decisions on and sign the land tenure agreements. A committee of elders acted as a decision-making body to facilitate the process and prevent the emergence of conflicts. An official ceremony marked the signing of the land tenure agreement by 24 village committee presidents and Maghama land authority representatives.

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