



Annual World Bank Conference on Land and Poverty 2013

**Connecting people, sharing knowledge, increasing transparency.
Using the Land Portal to increase access to open data, share best practices
and monitor women's land rights**

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**Paper prepared for presentation at the
“ANNUAL WORLD BANK CONFERENCE ON LAND AND POVERTY”
The World Bank - Washington DC, April 8-11, 2013**

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Abstract

Access to knowledge is essential for individuals and communities seeking to secure land rights, particularly for women. Stronger networks between government agencies, CSOs, and emerging social movements are needed to support more just, equitable and gender aware land governance. Over recent decades land governance groups have come to use the Internet in their practice, but it's full potential is by no means realized. In this paper we explore how online platforms can support land advocacy and governance, drawing on learning from current practice, and highlighting emerging frontiers of relevance to the field. We focus in particular on learning from two years of The Land Portal (landportal.info), and on plans for it's next phase of development. We draw on a recent online dialogue that focused on ways of optimizing the use of online platforms in efforts to promote equitable and sustainable natural governance and social justice, and to share experiences on approaches to monitoring women's land rights. We end the paper looking to the future of the Land Portal as a platform for open content, open data, and ultimately, a more open and collaborative approaches to land governance.

Keywords:

Land right, Advocacy, Gender, Knowledge Sharing, Open Data

1) Introduction: Role of online platforms in land advocacy and governance

At first glance the ‘virtual’ world of the Internet, online communities and digital data sharing – and the grounded, located realities of struggles to promote women’s land rights as part of land governance, might appear to have little to do with one another. Yet, the Internet has a vital role to play in both local and global debates and action on land rights and governance. The growing global pressure on land and natural resources, also referred to as the ‘Rush for Land’ (Anseeuw, Wily, Cotula, & Taylor, 2012) is increasingly having a negative impact on the rights and livelihoods of local communities. Within those communities, women are disproportionately affected because of their gender, as women’s land rights are shaped by complex systems of statutory and customary law and practices, as well as the practice and perception of a woman’s position in the household, family and community. One of the main obstacles to women exercising rights to land is the scant knowledge they have of their rights, as well as their absence from the public sphere more generally. This means that women are not only lacking information, but also opportunities to engage in collective action for land rights. Online platforms have significant potential to support more just and sustainable approaches to land governance: through the gathering and sharing of open data to increase transparency and accountability in government and private sectors; through providing participatory forums for inclusive bottom up dialogue and the generation of new knowledge that can complement official information; and through networking advocates and officials working to transform land governance.

In this paper we explore how online platforms can support land advocacy and governance, drawing on learning from current practice, and highlighting emerging frontiers of relevance to land governance policy makers and practitioners. We focus in particular on learning from the first two years of The Land Portal (landportal.info), and on plans for its next phase of development. We also draw on a recent online dialogue hosted on the Land Portal and a number of partner platforms that was designed to support collective reflection on ways of optimizing the use of online platforms in efforts to promote equitable and sustainable natural governance and social justice, and to share experiences on approaches to monitoring women’s land rights. In the following sections, after introducing the Land Portal, we explore the dynamic development of Internet connectivity and content over recent decades and discuss relevant gender aspects, before turning to examples and emerging online practice in the land governance sector: for governments, advocacy organizations, and new transparency movements. We end by outlining important future directions for use of the Internet to advance transparent and informed land governance through increased

availability of open land information and the active participation of stakeholders in global dialogue on critical land issues.

2) Introducing the Land Portal

Resulting from several years of preparation, analysis and consultation, the Land Portal Partnership launched the Land Portal in 2011 to promote data sharing, improve transparency and access to information on land and other natural resources by connecting individuals and organizations around the world and allowing them to more easily create, share, and disseminate reliable content. The Land Portal is aimed at becoming the global gateway for land related information, aggregating and managing heterogeneous data from multiple sources and achieving interoperability of content as well as mapping land experts and organizations from civil society organizations, governmental and intergovernmental institutions and academia to finally build up a specialized community of land governance experts.

Success for the Land Portal is defined as significantly improving transparency and access to information on land and other natural resources by connecting individuals and organizations around the world and allowing them to more quickly and easily create, share, and disseminate reliable content.

The Land Portal was launched at the 2011 World Bank Conference on Land and Poverty in Washington, and was presented at the 3rd European Forum on Rural Development in Spain, as well as at FAO and IFAD HQs in Rome, at the ILC Assembly of Members in Tirana (May 2011) and other events.

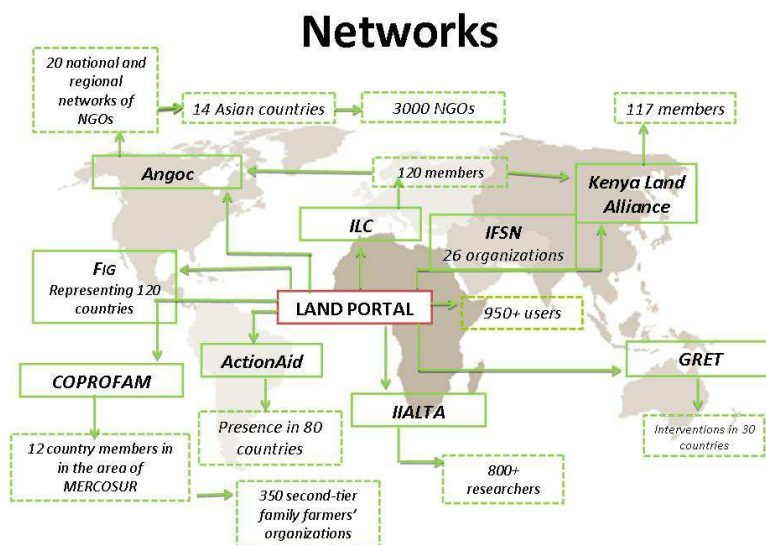


Figure 1: Land Portal potential outreach. Elaborated from Carpano, F. IFAD 2012

The Land Portal innovative approach to engaging stakeholders on the highly complex issue of land governance is the result of a growing partnership of many leading organizations (see Figure above) which now includes FAO, IFAD, ANGO, Action Aid, World Bank, IFPRI, FIG, OECD, among others. The Portal's expanding partnership and community of users (almost 1000 individual subscribed since April 2011, over 700 twitter followers) demonstrate that it has been well received by the land governance community. As a key founding member of the Land Portal initiative, the ILC Secretariat has played a leading role in creating this platform to gather, share and produce land-related information. This expanding partnership ensures that the Portal is coordinated, managed and populated with content by individuals and organizations working at the global, regional and country levels¹.

Sharing information and fostering dialogue on land related issues

In addition to offering a user driven platform that allows users to share information by uploading content, commenting and rating existing information, and retrieving information using specific filters, the Portal also provides a forum for dialogue, encouraging people to network with other stakeholders and discuss critical thematic topics related to land. These two functions - data aggregation and stakeholder dialog - provide the framework for new partnerships by empowering land-concerned individuals, communities, organisations, practitioners, and policy makers to share perspectives and best practices, and to collaborate strategically. Discussions hosted on the platform have addressed women's land rights in preparation of the CSW 56th session²; the dissemination and promotion of the Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Land, Fisheries and Forests in the Context of National Food Security (VGGT); and finally a recent (February 2013) online debate on open data and women's land rights monitoring.

A dialogue on online platforms and open data data

The successful growth of the Land Portal over the last two years is just a starting point. The full potential of online platforms for



¹ Land Portal activity has grown steadily in the past year, and web analytics continue to reflect a gradual upward trend, rising to an average of nearly 10,000 visits per month and a total of 70,180 unique visitors (visitors unduplicated, counted only once, that have accessed the website. The average visitor views 4.15 Pages per visit (repeat visits to the same page are counted). The Average duration of a visit/session was 00:04:04, which compares very favorably with general website averages. The involvement and interest from the Portal target audience, practitioners, research bodies as well as students, activists, NGOs and civil society reflect the relevance of the Land Portal platform to the land governance community. In 2012, there were 34% returning visitors versus 66% new visitors coming to the platform. Again, this compares well with other platforms.

² This discussion was facilitated by ILC and held simultaneously on the Land Portal and on the FSN-Forum. About 70 contributions were received from 32 countries, including from grassroots activists, researchers, NGO and government staff. The discussion page was visited more than 32,000 times and more than 50 new users signed up to the Land Portal during the discussion. A synthesis of the discussion was shared at the CSW in New York and is available in three languages here. The discussion was a good opportunity to explore the potential of the Land Portal especially in relation to increasing knowledge and participation towards selected policy events.

promoting inclusive consultation of issues of high global interest is certainly not yet realized. In order to explore in more depth the opportunities and challenges for ongoing use of the Internet in promoting more equitable and sustainable natural governance and social justice, and to draw particular attention to how online platforms may operate when applied in the context of women's land rights, the latest Land Portal dialogue took this as its focus. Building on learning from past dialogues, this discussion took place over the course of two weeks at the start of February 2013. The dialogue was framed by a problem statement, and an invitation for contributors from grassroots organizations, civil society, IGO's and governments to share their responses to a number of key questions through a range of different online communities. The discussion was organized in partnership with different online platforms including Wikigender, e-agriculture, AIMS, FSN-Forum and the Open Knowledge Foundation Open Development mailing list, and the initial problem statement and questions were available in three languages: English, Spanish and French. By distributing the dialogue across these platforms, and curating the results on the Land Portal, the facilitation team sought to bring together perspectives and insights from a number of different communities – including the open data community, and specialists in gender and women's land rights.

Throughout the rest of this paper we draw upon insights from that dialogue. These are highlighted with the citation (LP Dialogue, 2013), or discussed as points from 'the online dialogue'. A full synthesis of all the comments received is also available on the Land Portal website. A list of contributors to the dialogue is included at the end of this document.

3) A changing world: connectivity, communication and content

The Land Portal dialogue on online platforms took place against the background of decades of technological and global change. In looking at the role that online platforms play, it is important to place them in historical context, and to have a clear view of the point we have reached. How far is the Internet accessible to all the groups with a stake in land governance, and to women in particular? And what sorts of platforms and networks are available for the land governance community to draw upon? We explore these issues in turn.

The growth of connectivity: global networks and digital divides

Since the emergence of the Internet in the 1970s, and the World Wide Web in the 1990s, much has been written on the role that online platforms can play in transforming dialog and decision-making processes, both for advocacy movements and for governments. It has been argued that the decentralization of communication technologies supports a powerful democratizing trend with the increasing potential to

challenge traditional power hierarchies (Clark, 1995; Gómez, 1997; Meyer, 1997; Spybey, 1995; V. Srinivasan, 2006). Whilst early utopian visions of the Internet as transcending politics and power have not been realized, the Internet has been woven into everyday life and business across the world. This has driven the emergence of what Castell's terms the 'Network Society' (Castells, 2000), a globally interconnected space in which power is shaped by the structure and content of communication networks, and in which action within digital networks of communication is a vital part of any strategy to effect change (Castells, 2009).

As Internet use expands globally (reaching 2.3 billion people in 2011 according to ITU estimates), particularly in the global south, millions more people are gaining access to information, forums for self-expression, and connections into local and global advocacy networks. We can anticipate that many millions more will be connected each year. However, these trends are neither uniform nor equal in terms of access and benefits of connectivity. Since the mid 1990s policy initiatives have raised concerns about the 'digital divides'. The idea of a digital divide initially focused on the gap between those with, and those without connectivity to the Internet. However, increasingly the digital divide is recognized to include other barriers, such as the lack of information online in local languages, or the complexity of the information that is available. The Community Informatics field in particular has emphasized that it is important not only to look at access, but also at whether those gaining access to the Internet can make 'effective use' of the tools and content available, highlighting that factors external to the connection technology, such as literacy levels, language, culture and the provision of appropriate online spaces may all affect how far any individual or community can participate in the opportunities presented by the Internet (Gurstein, 2003).

Gender roles and relationships are of particular importance as they are additional obstacles hindering women from making use of the Internet, as highlighted by participants in our online dialogue. Connectivity and literacy barriers, as well as the absence of women from public spaces such as internet cafes in many cultures, may prevent many rural women from making direct use of online information resources. As early as 2005, a UN report on gender and ICTs stated "*Most poor women in developing countries are further removed from the information age than the men whose poverty they share*" (DAW, 2005). Just as for on women's access to and control over land, data on women's access to the Internet is scarce. As quoted in the online dialogue, a recent study carried out by Intel with UN Women and the US State Department gathered data that shows that the gender gap is real (Intel, 2013). Not only does this study find that on average 25% fewer women have access to the internet – with the figure rising to 45% in Sub-Saharan Africa – but that one in five women in India and Egypt believes the internet is not appropriate for them to use.

This gap reflects the (gender) inequalities that exist in societies, which can be exacerbated when access to ICTs is facilitated without addressing such inequalities explicitly. In a previous discussion held by ILC on the Land Portal concerning ways to secure women's land rights the majority of participants were male, despite the topic being focused clearly on women's rights (LP Dialogue, 2013). This highlights the need to think about the target audience of online tools, about the barriers beyond simple connectivity that may lead to gender divides in participation, and ways of encouraging more participation by women to make dialogues as inclusive as possible. For women in rural areas who are not connected, the increasing use of online platform by those able to access them might marginalise them even further unless there are specific efforts to gather information, opinions and perspectives from rural women and their organisations to feed into online platforms, as well as facilitate the use of such platforms by those concerned. At the same time, participants also suggested that women leaders and younger women may have more ICT access and the potential of mobile phones to close the connectivity gap was highlighted (LP Dialogue, 2013).

The growth of mobile access globally, with over 6 billion telephone subscriptions now existing across the world³, and 1 billion mobile broadband subscriptions (ITU, 2012) suggests then, that where the connectivity dimensions of the digital divide is closing, it is closing not through computer-and-keyboard connections to the Internet, but through mobile phones. It has been argued that the developing world is largely 'leapfrogging' over the patterns of technology adoption seen in developed countries, to go straight to mobile. Mobile adoption figures can hide gender divides: whilst many countries now have over 100% phone penetration (i.e. more phone subscriptions than people), in practice women are less likely to have control of their own mobile handsets (GSMA, 2012).

Right now, few online land governance resources are built to work well on a mobile phone screen. As one online dialogue participant noted "have also identified mobile devices as another way of distributing information and are working to place this information in a format suitable for cell sized screens" (Land Coalition Dialogue, 2013). However, the current growth in mobile access does not yet necessarily mean high smart-phone penetration with web browsers and large screens. As research from the iHub in Kenya illustrates, in 2012 approximately 53% of mobiles in the country are basic models capable of only SMS, and 37% are 'feature phones' capable of running small applications, but not running full smart phone operating systems which make up just 9% (Crandall et al., 2012). This has led to innovators exploring ways to connect up services based on the Short Messaging Service (SMS) with the Internet, including a far wider population within networks of communication. In thinking about the use of mobile for land

³ Note that this does not equate to 6 billion people connected – as in over 105 countries there are more telephone subscriptions than inhabitants – suggesting many of the subscriptions counted are duplicates owned by the same individuals.

governance we should not lose sight of the qualitative difference in being able to browse and read documents on a large screen from the comfort of your desk, from reading reports of engaging on conversations from a smartphone screen and keyboard, or interacting with information by the exchange of 160 character short-messages.

All these challenges noted, that connectivity is growing, and the potential of the Internet is being extended with it, is unquestionable. But connectivity alone is only the foundation on which well designed platforms and projects can be built – rather than the solution in and of itself.

Online platforms: from e-mail lists to open data

From the early Internet of e-mail lists and bulletin boards, to the modern Internet of online forums, instant messaging, video sharing, web conferencing, mobile apps, social networks and micro-blogs (such as Twitter), we have seen constant innovation. Whilst a few early tools have largely disappeared (terminal-based bulletin boards for example), in many cases the tools and platforms available to organizations and individuals seeking to use the Internet for information sharing, communication and community building have accumulated: requiring practitioners to develop a wide repertoire, choosing how to combine different online tools into projects and platforms, and requiring conscious activity to bridge and connect together different spaces (Wenger, White, & Smith, 2009).

The evolution of the World Wide Web is often described in terms of the move from ‘Web 1.0’, where individuals and organizations with the means to do so established their own web sites consisting of pages of interlinked information and where most people were readers, to ‘Web 2.0’ (O’Reilly, 2005), where platforms such as YouTube or Facebook emerged allowing ordinary users to share and discuss rich content, from text in blog posts or status updates, to photos, audio and videos. Social media, and social networks, have come to structure many people’s personal use of the web. Although initially seen as the preserve of young people, social media and social networks are now used widely across age groups. The integration of social networks into the enterprise, and into professional working lives, has varied widely between different sectors and organizations. Whilst many international agencies have experimented with social media, corporate ICT policies often still block access to interactive online spaces, inhibiting the participation of professionals in many existing online community spaces. A small number of social network, social media and search engine platforms have come to dominate the online environment, either nationally or globally, with sites like Google, Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, Sina Weibo (Chinese microblogging) and Mxit (mobile based instant messenger and SNS platform; popular in South Africa) providing platforms on top of which many communities are built. Alongside these large platforms, a ‘long tail’ of niche platforms exist (Anderson, 2006; Leadbeater, 2011), tailored to particular interest or

professional communities. The Land Portal, built using the open source Drupal framework, is one of these subject-specific communities.

The rise of smartphones as key devices for accessing the Internet has also spurred innovation: as applications on these phones can take advantage of in built Global Position System (GPS), cameras, tilt switches and other sensors to provide location-aware interactive services, and to treat phones as data powerful collection devices, feeding data back onto the Internet as well as fetching data. Projects like the much cited Ushahidi platform, originally developed to gather reports of violence following the 2007/8 Kenya Election (Okolloh, 2009) take advantage of widespread mobile phone use for ‘crowdmapping’, allowing phone users to report particular issues via SMS or smartphone, geolocating and building up a picture of user-reports on an online map. This is enabled by the use of structured data formats, highlighting a key element of what some have termed ‘Web 3.0’, the web of data⁴.

If Web 1.0 was about documents, and Web 2.0 was about social media, people and participation, then the next evolution of the Web may involve the widespread publication of structured open data. In the last five years, datasets ranging from public spending datasets and statistical indicators, to land ownership and sales data, have been published online by governments in standard formats, and under intellectual property terms that allow them to be re-used by anyone. For example, citizens in Kenya can now download detailed datasets on Constituency Development Fund spending, and census data on county urbanization from the opendata.go.ke portal; and citizens anywhere in the world can access World Bank indicator data on land use in structured forms from data.worldbank.org. Civic-minded programmers have taken many of these datasets, creating tools and visualizations that seek to make this data accessible and use it to create change. Hundreds of new web-based platforms for working with open data, including at scale with ‘big data’ platforms have emerged, and advocacy for governments to release their data has received a boost through the inclusion of open data as a key theme in discussions within the 50+ country Open Government Partnership (www.opengovpartnership.org). The World Bank in particular has been supporting the developing of country-level open government data initiatives in developing countries, building on pilot projects in Moldova and Kenya (Majeed, 2012; Rahemtulla et al., 2011, 2012).

How does this rapidly development landscape of Internet connectivity and content affect land advocacy and governance? In the next section we explore this, looking from the perspective of governments, civil society, and networked forms of advocacy.

⁴ For some, the term Web 3.0 points specifically to ‘Linked Data’ and the semantic web, which specifically involves the publication of data using rules set out by Web creator Tim Berners-Lee (2010) where entities in datasets are identified by URLs (web links). For a discussion of Linked Data in development see Davies and Edwards (2012). We use the term Web 3.0 to indicate the emerging importance of data on the web.

4) Use of internet-based tools in land advocacy and governance

The increased use of online tools (from e-mail lists, to SMS broadcast messages, online forums, and now open data, to name just a few that have been adopted) has had profound impacts on land advocacy efforts over recent decades. Use of these online tools, particularly by civil society organizations (CSOs), has enabled a diversity of new stakeholders to overcome geographical barriers to access information on land, communicate globally with other stakeholders, and participate in decision-making processes. While caveats exist in terms of the barriers preventing women's equal access, the advantage of internet-based tools like online platforms is precisely that they have the potential – provided the basic infrastructure is available and those accessing it have functional literacy skills - to overcome the geographical, economic, cultural, social exclusion women suffer – i.e. once they have access to the technology, participation in virtual spaces is less restricted and allows for diversity. As this trend continues, its important to consider how the use of online platforms by civil society actors and government has evolved over time to fully understand how these technologies can be utilized in the future.

Governments and Government Agencies

For governments, government agencies and multilateral institutions across the world, the Internet has become a fundamental part of governing (Hood & Margetts, 2007). The 2012 UN E-Government Survey shows that whilst there are still large gaps between the degree of e-government adoption by region and country, many governments are not only providing information online, but are also using the Internet for transactional services (including land registration in a number of countries), for engaging with citizens through social media and online discussion spaces, and sharing open data (UN - United Nations, 2012). For UN Agencies, and other multilateral bodies, the Internet has also become a key space for engagement with citizens and other stakeholders, with meetings webcast and the Internet used as a key platform for consultation on global issues.

The potential role of transactional services in supporting women's land rights was alluded to in our online dialogue, where one participant reported a female relative using the A2A (Anywhere-to-Anywhere) and PVS (Parcel Verification Service) services of the Philippines Land Registration Authority after the death of her husband:

“She used the A2A to request for the official land title and used the PVS to get a computer printout, which she then used to sell the land for funeral and living expenses... It saved her time and additional expenses, and a lot of grief. It was also a good way to convince the buyer that the land she was getting was legitimate, properly and correctly titled. In our country where the life

expectancy of men is shorter than women's, educating women to use ICT-enabled services is a very good way to ensure women's understanding, claiming and guaranteeing of their land rights when their husbands, fathers or older brothers move on."

As this example notes, education in how to use ICT services, and design of services to ensure they are accessible and easy to use is important to realize the benefits of transactional services for individual land rights. However, many of the most important possibilities for creating more equitable land governance are not in the realm of transaction services, but are concerned with the use of the Internet to support greater democratic participation, citizen input and feedback, and to support transparency and accountability through open data and access to information. Although more than a third of countries offer no e-participation services to their citizens (UN - United Nations, 2012), governments and international agencies are increasingly turning to the web to co-ordinate and act as a hub for participation projects. E-petitions, social media channels for talking to officials, and online consultations all provide a means for citizen input.

The 'My World 2015' consultation (www.myworld2015.org), for example, makes use of an online survey of citizen priorities, made available in 10 different languages, and feeding responses into a common dataset that can be analyzed to feed into the debates over the next (post-2015) global development agenda. Recognizing that an online-only survey would leave out many people, the My World 2015 project is also offering SMS and toll-free Interactive Voice Response (IVR) options for completing the survey, and is carrying out a paper ballot through local partners, where results can be sent in by photographing the ballots on camera phones. These mixed methods all feed into the one central My World website, where online and offline engagement with the debate are aggregated.

Where My World is based around a poll of priorities, other e-participation initiatives rely on providing space for citizen feedback, or discussion around particular policy initiatives. Using the Internet to 'close the feedback loop', getting information on the impact of projects back to governments, or to donors, is a key focus for the multi-stakeholder Open Aid Partnership (www.openaidmap.org), whose starting point has been to geocode where aid-funded projects are taking place, recognizing that to enable citizen feedback requires localized information, as close to citizens lived experience as possible. As yet, experiences creating sustainable feedback loops to government remain mixed, although our online dialogue highlighted again the importance of having offline ways to offer feedback: for example, through local call centers that can take reports of land rights issues from citizens and feed these into online platforms (LP Dialogue, 2013). The development of common standards for feedback loops, notably in the

form of the Open311 project (www.open311.org) started the United States and providing a common mechanism for ‘issue reporting’ tools to interact, is likely to be important for the scaling of efforts to get citizen feedback into government effectively. Of course, if government is not responsive to citizen input, then the success of such efforts will be diminished.

The Internet has often been described as providing a new public space which anyone can participate in, providing a basis for government experiments with deliberative online dialogues – hosting policy discussions through e-mail lists or online forums. Online dialogue has the advantage that people can engage in their own time, removing the requirement for people to travel to regional centers or capital cities for consultation workshops and events, and opening up participation opportunities beyond the usual suspects. However, many such online dialogues can fall short of expectations, as just the thousands of citizens who could potentially take part have other competing pressures on their time, and making online discussion compelling enough for mass-participation is a considerable challenge. Yet, with reasonable expectations about the degree to which online dialogue can add new insights to a policy process, and a recognition that “turning conversation into action depends on leadership” (LP Dialogue, 2013) it can play a part of government strategies to consult and engage in relation to land governance.

Open data was not mentioned once in the 2008 UN E-Government Survey, but by 2012 it was discussed in a number of sections across the report (UN - United Nations, 2012). Governments across the world have started to adopt open data policies, using the Internet to publish structured datasets on departmental websites and open data portals. The World Bank launched it’s own Open Data Initiative in 2010, with the FAO following late last year with data.fao.org, and over 280 national and city level open data portals now exist. In the United Kingdom, one of the first countries to establish a national open data policy, monthly updated data of land transactions from the land registry is now published in structured formats, and local governments have experimented with releasing details of land holdings in order to stimulate local debate about how government owned land should be used. Increased availability of data on land issues from governments has a number of uses: it can support transparency and accountability efforts, holding government to account; it can provide the ‘infrastructure’ for citizen feedback on land issues – linking reports of issues to data on land ownership; and it can support innovative work to make citizens aware of local issues, such as Open Development Cambodia’s (www.opendevelopmentcambodia.net) rich interactive maps of mining concessions, land concessions and protected areas, drawn from government datasets.

However, as our online discussions noted, open data from government is only as good as the underlying data (Thurston, 2012), and badly designed digitization efforts can have serious consequences for citizens (Raman, 2012). Gender disaggregated data is often not available, and where disaggregation is available governments may only have data on issues such as plot ownership, when what may be needed is information over who controls decision making and operation of the plot. Dialogue participants highlighted that data on it's own can be 'cold' and inaccessible to marginalized women, and participants also discussed whether a focus on data prioritizes particular ways of knowing – emphasizing 'statistics' over and above 'stories' and lived realities (See also Powell, Davies, & Taylor, 2012). Transparency and accountability efforts may also need to use Right to Information laws alongside access to data proactively published by governments (Janssen, 2012; Perini, 2012), and government does not always collect the data that citizens need to take action on their rights⁵. This is where civil society organizations, and new forms of civil mobilization may enter the picture, and it is to civil society use of the Internet we now turn.

Civil Society Organizations

The Land Portal holds details of hundreds of organizations working on land governance, including many civil society organizations (CSOs), including civil society networks with hundreds of grassroots member organizations. Browsing their profiles, the diversity of civil society is evident: with organizations ranging from global projects and transnational networks, to grassroots level advocacy groups in a country, district, or village focused on one specific issues, or cross-cutting agendas of which land is just one part.

A critical component of early online platforms for many of those groups who had connectivity was greatly improved access to public information. Writing about NGO online networking in the 1990s, Gomez explains: "*Better information is perceived to be another major effect of using CMC (Computer-mediated communication) among NGOs. This means having access to more abundant, more updated and more relevant information, accessible through more channels and from more sources, and with more powerful tools to search and gather new information*" (Gómez, 1997). Increased access to standard information sources such as government databases, international publications, market data and historical records has helped CSOs improve the relevancy and impact of their attempts to influence government policy, as well as efforts to protect land rights on the ground. This use of the Internet as a means for CSO access to information has continued to be important, and as connectivity has grown, more groups have been able to draw on available resources, albeit with barriers to 'effective use' of the information

⁵ The Exploring the Emerging Impacts of Open Data in Developing Countries (ODDC) project will be exploring a number of critical questions above how open data is used in practice with marginalized groups over the course of 2013/14. More information is available at <http://www.opendataresearch.org/emergingimpacts/>

remaining in many contexts. However, it is the role of the Internet in networking civil society that has been the most transformative (Chadwick, 2006), and the emerging potential of digital tools to allow civil society to collectively generate their own information at scale, adding to, or challenging dominant state and private sector narratives, that promises the greatest coming transformations. Increasingly governments and international agencies are recognizing the potential of this too – with the Food and Agriculture Organization gender department exploring ways to use the Land Portal discussion and social network features to collect data, cross-check, cross verify and challenge existing information held in their Gender and Land Rights Database, which has to date predominantly relied upon ‘official’ sources.

Online platforms have supported more effective communication within, and between, advocacy groups as well as to those outside of their communities. As Gomez writes of Latin American CSOs:

“Users...report a sense of enhanced networking...which has allowed them a better coordination of activities based on shared interests with partners... Furthermore, initial data indicates that new contacts have been made possible for NGOs, providing more new partners with whom to exchange information. Users also report that CMC [computer mediated communication] makes it possible to maintain the relations with their partners on a more regular basis, shortening geographical distances, and strengthening internal communication between branches of an organization, both nationally and internationally.... In this way, CMC is perceived to strengthen the bonds within the NGO community...” (Gómez, 1997)

This strengthening of CSO communities by-way-of improved communication is a critical point, as these online platforms not only allow stakeholders to better maintain existing relationships overtime, but also allow advocacy actors to expand and enhance their networks by developing new relationships. This is exemplified on the Land Portal, where creating a shared space has enabled greater collaboration between the International Land Coalition, the International Alliance on Land Tenure and Administration, Action Aid and other partners. By combining stakeholder mapping with tools for interaction, networking and outreach, the portal seeks to amplify the efforts of each organization involved.

To compliment the benefits of increased communication, online platforms as decentralized communication networks also have revolutionized the ways in-which civil society actors organize their advocacy efforts and approach both localized and international issues. Gomez suggests that *“NGOs had generally been very isolated from each other, but there has been a recent trend towards their articulation around... global issues,”* which represents *“steps towards the transnationalization of civil participation,*

the differentiated cosmopolitanism that is made possible with the use of CMC among NGOs worldwide” (ibid.) This point indicates that the ability of civil society stakeholders to quickly and efficiently communicate and coordinate advocacy strategy “*expanded the geographical boundaries of partnerships to a larger perspective of a global NGO community confronting similar problems in different contexts”* (ibid.; Frederick, 1992). Thus this CSO ability to identify with other foreign CSOs as part of a broad global community offers new opportunities for actors to approach major global issues that cannot be effectively addressed only at the local level, such as climate change, and for connections to be drawn between different issues. Participants in the online dialogue highlighted, for example, the importance of linking land and water issues, and linking land and gender campaigning communities (LP Dialogue, 2013).

As well as enabling civil society to network and coordinate, digital tools are also being used by CSOs to co-create information and data, working collaboratively across organizational boundaries to build shared knowledge resources that drive more informed practice, and that address the information asymmetries that often exist between CSOs and government, or CSOs and private firms. These efforts include donor-funded content generation, as in the case of the World Resources Institute and Landesa’s collaboration to create the www.FocusOnLand.com e-learning platform to share knowledge that will promote equitable access to land for women; and ongoing collaborative work on resource creation as on the WikiGender.org platform that uses wiki-based software to bring together researchers, CSOs and intergovernmental bodies to “*facilitate the exchange and improve the knowledge on gender equality-related issues around the world”* and gather “*empirical evidence and identifying adequate statistics to measure gender equality”* (www.wikigender.org about page, accessed 27th Feb 2013).

CSOs are also co-producing information at the local and national level. In Colombia, the Advocacy roundtable of rural women (Mesa de incidencia), composed by women’s organisations, has contributed to monitoring women’s land rights by providing specific inputs to a 2011 UNDPs report on human development. The Mesa used their web page (www.mujeresruralescolombianas.org) as a tool to communicate and share information with stakeholders, including on actions taken by the roundtable, and as a platform for engaging in other wider networks (LP Dialogue, 2013). In Mozambique CSOs working with the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and government representatives have used Global Positioning Systems (GPS) and online mapping systems to support rural communities’ efforts to delimit and map their community land resources (Norfolk & Tanner, 2007; Tanner, De Wit, & Norfolk, 2009). After using online tools in the mapping process, newly defined community maps are then made available to the public via online databases for broader distribution. Srinivasan discusses a related case, where

researchers collaborated with the Changpa, a nomadic pastoral community who inhabit the high-altitude regions around the Tso Kar basin wetlands in Ladakh, India, to build up maps representing local land ownership and use, exploring how digitization of maps, and combining locally generated and official maps could support communities to protect their land rights and local environments (S. Srinivasan, 2012). These cases contrast with the example raised in our online dialogue of the Bhoomi land information digitization in Bangalore, India, where it has been argued that the approach taken, through a public-private partnership, prioritized one form of land documentation over others, leading to the marginalization of land claims from poorer citizens (Benjamin, Bhuvanewari, & Rajan, 2007; Raman, 2012).

Ultimately, the continued evolution and increased use of online platforms by CSOs has led to greater access to information, improved communication, and more inclusive global networking and solidarity, further, contributing to greater involvement of civil society in land issues at the field and policy levels. The increasingly core role of CSOs in multi-stakeholder forums is illustrated by the composition of the revitalized FAO Committee on Food Security, which was restructured in 2009, creating greater space for CSOs. To increase their impact in the committee CSOs have organized through the 'Civil Society Mechanism for the Committee on Food Security' (www.csm4cfs.org) establishing a multi-lingual online hub to share resources and news. Thus for CSOs, use of online platforms over the past decades has been integral to greater involvement in land issues globally and will continue to play a critical role in advancing better land governance in the future.

Emerging forms: open data and open development

Discussing the impact of the Internet on politics, Andrew Chadwick describes how “*hybrid organizations are emerging, for which the Internet is central and which exhibit combinations of behaviors typically associated with parties, interest groups, and social movements*” (Chadwick, 2007). Whilst the Internet has reconfigured the practices of existing CSOs, it has also allowed the creation of new kinds of movements and activism, centered on transparency and accountability, and drawing upon open data from governments, and data crowd-sourced bottom up from citizens. In many cases the actors involved in these movements are not structured within a CSO, or working in government funded projects, but are, to use a phrase from Clay Shirky, ‘*organizing without organizations*’ (Shirky, 2008), creating ad-hoc collaborations, or non-constituted transnational networks of interested individuals. In other cases, projects started through the voluntary action of Internet connected individuals, and the tools and techniques they developed have gone on to be adopted by established organizations, and a number of informal groups have moved to become established CSOs.

Alongside Wikipedia, the Open Street Map deserves profile as one of the wonders of the online world – as thousands of volunteers contribute to creating an accurate and openly licensed map of the world. Following from spontaneous action by Open Street Map volunteers around a number of crisis events, such as when volunteers working from home across the world were able to map post-earthquake Haiti from satellite maps, there is now a Humanitarian Open Street Map team, ready to volunteer-map crisis locations, and to use volunteer collaborative mapping as a tool for development (<http://hot.openstreetmap.org>). Similarly, a rapid-response project, the Ushahidi election violence monitoring project in Kenya, has gone on to provide the basis for CrowdMap, a free platform being used by groups across the world to monitor human rights and other issues.

One user of CrowdMap is Land Portal partner Ekta Parishad (EP) who established www.globalmovement2012.org to source reports of land rights issues across India, documenting hundreds of cases as part of Samwad Yatra, a collection of grievances, and a mass- grassroots- non-violent mobilization. This was linked to the *Jan Satyagraha* foot march, in which thousands of people joined a month long walk to Delhi to “raise the issue about land being a key asset in development and poverty reduction, and that high levels of landlessness and deprivation need to be reduced for achieving positive national and global development”⁶. Using the Crowd-Mapped reports, a short book was produced with stories about the reported cases. Work is ongoing to develop ways to verify reports to the platform, and to take the model to other countries, using the open source nature of the platform to share it horizontally with other CSOs.

With the rise of proactive open data publication from governments, and the creation of structured datasets from crowdsourcing, and ‘data scraping’ to generate data from non-open information on government websites, a new set of intermediary platforms have emerged seeking to make data more accessible to citizens and advocacy groups. We have already mentioned Open Development Cambodia, developed out of the ‘Bar Camp’ movement of informal self-organized gatherings where technically skilled individuals come together to work on shared projects. Framed as an ‘open data platform’ the group see their role as being a neutral intermediary turning government data into accessible maps and presentations. Similarly,

⁶ Ekta Parishad also organized two online discussions on the Land Portal (1) [“The global need of non-violent struggle around land rights: a path for change”](#) in September 2012 seeking to advocate and debate non-violent struggles for land; and (2) [“Is the right to land for shelter a human right?”](#) following the *Jan Satyagraha* foot march and aiming to share ideas and opinions on links between the right to land and the right to shelter and how the right to shelter has different meanings in different contexts.

OpenCorporates.com, formally run as a private enterprise but committed to open data, is gathering open data millions of companies across the world, seeking to provide a platform that makes corporate data more accessible, and that supports a wide range of activities, including transparency and accountability efforts. How these open data projects, often operating within the narrative of ‘providing a platform’ rather than within particular campaigning or transparency and accountability narratives, can be harnessed for land governance and advocacy is something for ongoing exploration.

The Land Matrix, currently hosted on the Land Portal, provides another example of open data in action in the field, documenting over 900 land deals with information supplied by researchers and campaign groups. By creating a space to combine disparate data, the Land Matrix allows all the partner organisations to build up a richer picture of land issues, and to share their data for advocacy groups, and data journalists to draw upon.

5) Making connections and open development: the future of the Land Portal

So how can we use online platforms to increase access to open data and share best practices of monitoring women’s land rights? The discussions above have highlighted the significant potential of the Internet, but also some of the challenges involved in ensuring gender inclusive access to, and use of, communication technologies for land governance. Whilst responding to these challenges is a complex task, and involves many different forms of action, we believe continued online dialogue and knowledge sharing has a role to play, and it is incumbent upon advocates of technology to continually work towards greater equity in both its use and its impacts.

Throughout the February 2013 Land Portal dialogue a creative tension was evident – between the need to localize and contextualize dialogue and action to particular issues – and the need to join up civil society, government and research to share learning at a global level. The dialogue itself was designed to work with this tension – taking place simultaneously in different theme specific communities, and then bringing together the results of the discussions through active curation. As one participant in the dialogue noted, the growth of online platforms has at times led to the “*over-saturation of information and overworked people*” with “*numerous portals, networks, platforms, wikis, blogs, websites, listservs ... operating with similar principles, goals and a great deal of member overlap*”. Building on the partnerships underlying the Land Portal, and meeting the goal of providing the global reference point for land-related information, whilst at the same time avoiding duplications of effort, and providing inclusive, relevant and contextualized access to information for policy makers, practitioners and grass-roots communities requires continued attention. Following an in-depth self assessment during 2012, the Land Portal

partnership unanimously decided to conduct a major redevelopment of the Land Portal in 2013, building on the existing open data and ‘open development’ values of the platform.

Smith and Elder (2010) define open development as involving “*a) Universal over restricted access; b) universal over restricted participation in informal and formal groups/institutions; and c) collaborative over centralized production*”. For the Land Portal, applying these principles means being both a producer and a consumer of open information. Land Portal content is licensed using Creative Commons licenses, that set out clearly the rights of anyone accessing the content to re-use it, and rather than requiring content to be posted direct to the portal, it aggregates together much of it’s content from other information sources. The next iteration of the Land Portal will make greater use of open data and linked data technologies to pull in insights from different parties, creating a ‘land book of countries’ with country profile pages. Increased use of semantic web technologies to bring together resources from national, regional and global partners into a Land Library, will be complemented by tools that add value to the aggregated content using improved meta-data extraction and semantic enrichment techniques that interlink content. The enriched and annotated content will be available as part of the growing ‘web of data’ for others to build upon also, and by seeking to create a more comprehensive collection of data on land the Portal will explore ways to cross and combine data, revealing new trends in the land governance field, as well as highlighting current gaps in the available data.

The updated Land Portal will also build in the recognition that not all insights exist in ready-published reports or in datasets – but that dialogue around data, and around key issues, remains essential (De Cindio, 2012). Supported by the multi-lingual portal interface (English; Spanish; French), and regular newsletters in multiple languages, the portal will establish a land debate institute regularly hosting and facilitating debates on land topics. The updated portal will allow users access to all these features in more intuitive and accessible ways, including through a range of devices – both web and mobile.

This platform is not something the Land Portal team can build alone. Developers, open data experts, data visualization experts, info-activists, open government and open access experts will all be invited to get involved. But equally, the platform will continue to bring together governments, civil society at all levels, and those involved in emerging forms of Internet mediated action – collaboratively producing an open platform that brings about positive transformations in land governance. We invite you to join us in this continued journey. www.landportal.info

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Appendix: Contributors the online dialogue

Our thanks to everyone who took part in the February 2013 online dialogue and shared comments that have informed and enriched this paper, including*: Candy Schibli (World Resource Institute), Gaby Gomez García, (Independent Consultant), Kunuthur Srinivasa Reddy, Henri Ligot, Fladei, Lucas Charles Mkwizu, Neil Sorensen, Gonzalo, Chris Baulman (landrights4all), Jesse Duncan (Foodgovernance.org), Gine Zwart (OXFAM), Amy O'Donnel, (FrontlineSMS), Sandra Apaza Lanyi (ILC America Latina y el Caribe), Ruth Meinzen-Dick (IFPRI), Chiara Novarik, (IFPRI), Natalia Vaccarezza (World Bank), Angela Hariche (OECD), Salema, Estelle Loiseau (Wikigender).

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