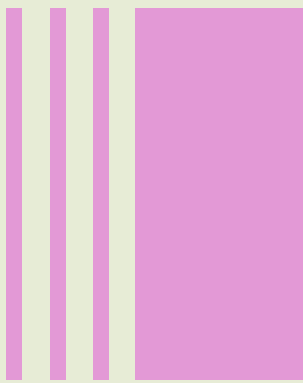
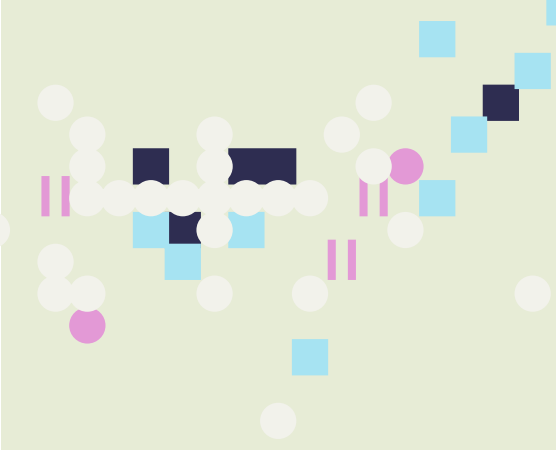
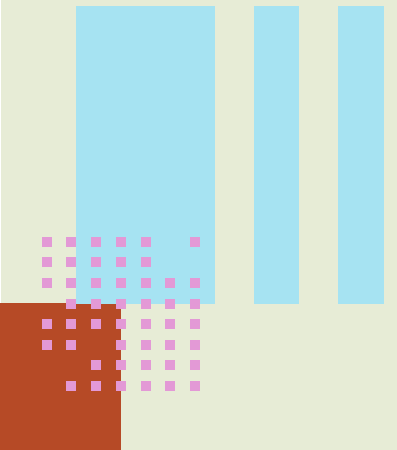




Land, Governance, and Resilience:



Strengthening Implementation Conditions



(TMG)
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Summary

Collaboration and stakeholder engagement are widely recognized as essential for implementing United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) land tenure decisions. In practice, however, they often remain fragmented, ad hoc, and insufficiently supported. This brief argues that the key constraint is not a lack of collaboration, but the absence of institutional, financial, and coordination conditions that enable UNCCD National Focal Points (NFPs) to make collaboration work. Strengthening these conditions is critical to translating existing commitments into implementable action.

Key messages

- Challenges to achieving land degradation neutrality targets are not technical. They are institutional. Limited decision-making capacities, fragmented civil society engagement, siloed data systems, and constrained operational resources continue to slow progress.
- UNCCD NFPs cannot implement land tenure decisions alone. As hubs connecting a wider network of actors, they depend on strong partnership and collaboration with ministries, civil society, and international actors.
- Strengthened coordination and partnership require effective institutional mechanisms, supportive framework conditions, and resources.
- COP17 offers an opportunity not only to reaffirm commitments, but to strengthen the conditions for effective implementation. Strengthening and financing the collaboration framework, such as the UNCCD NFPs and CSO collaboration, should be a priority.

1. Land degradation as a governance and security challenge

Land degradation now affects up to 40 per cent of the world's land surface and half of humanity. Its consequences extend beyond environmental loss, driving food insecurity, rural displacement, economic instability, and, in fragile contexts, conflict. The G7 has recognized land degradation and drought as drivers of global instability, signalling that Land Degradation Neutrality (LDN) is not only an environmental concern, but also a matter of resilience and security.

The framework conditions for responding to this challenge have never been clearer and stronger. United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) decisions adopted at COP14, COP15, and COP16 emphasize the need to integrate land tenure, gender, participation, and inclusive governance in land restoration policies and programmes. Yet the gap between recommendation, commitment and delivery remains significant.

The gap is not primarily caused by insufficient ambition, a lack of science, or unclear targets. It is shaped by the governance conditions in which implementation takes place: fragmented institutions, under-resourced coordination, insecure land tenure, and limited structured engagement with the actors who hold local knowledge and legitimacy.

To achieve land degradation neutrality, we must therefore act on two levers. We must work on restoration and sustainable land management systems. We must also protect the land rights of dependent communities and prevent any form of exclusion. In practice, these two levers are often disconnected from each other and from the institutional realities in which National Focal Points (NFPs) operate.



2. The governance gap behind weak implementation

Despite commitments on land tenure, gender, participation, and inclusive governance, practical implementation continues to fall short due to structural reasons.

In many countries, institutions responsible for land, environment, and development operate in silos. Mandates are fragmented across ministries, and data systems are poorly connected. Civil society organisations, which hold critical local knowledge and legitimacy, are consulted irregularly, if at all. NFPs are expected to coordinate across this fragmented landscape to translate global commitments into national action, often without the mandate, resources, or structured mechanisms to do so effectively.

We call this a governance gap in implementation: a mismatch between what commitments require and the governance arrangements that national systems actually have in place to deliver them. The gap is not a lack of effort or political will. It is that existing institutions, mandates, and coordination mechanisms were not designed for the kind of cross-sector delivery that land tenure commitments now demand.

Land governance as both safeguard and enabler

Underlying this gap is a dual challenge that land governance systems must perform simultaneously. As safeguards, they protect legitimate tenure rights by securing land access, preventing dispossession, ensuring participation, and respecting customary and community rights. As enablers, they create incentives for land stewardship, support sustainable land management, and facilitate inclusive policy processes.

Restoration efforts that ignore the safeguard function risk reinforcing existing inequalities, displacing communities, undermining customary rights, or concentrating benefits among those who already hold power. Conversely, systems focused only on protection without enabling conditions can stall when rights are recognized on paper but not translated into investment, management, or resilience.

Land governance system

Two functions, one system

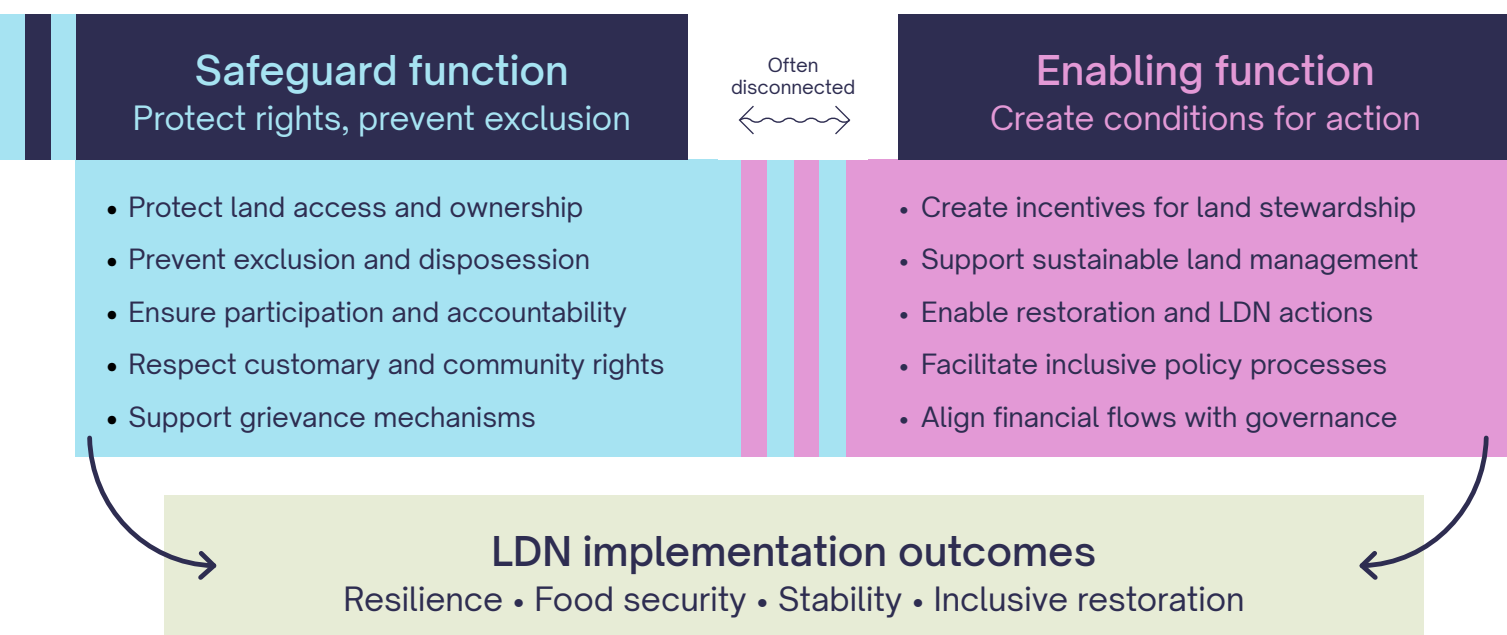


Figure 1. Land governance as both a safeguarding and an enabling system.

Building a collaboration framework

Addressing this dual challenge requires more than better policies. It requires a functioning network of actors with ministries, NFPs, civil society organisations, research institutions, customary authorities, and development partners, working with clear roles, structured coordination, and adequate resources. We call this an implementation ecosystem. The term is deliberate: it points to a system of actors who depend on each other to function, rather than a single chain of command or a one-off project structure. It is not a new bureaucratic layer, but a deliberate effort to make existing relationships more structured, more continuous, and less dependent on informal connections.

Each actor in this system works within its own arena, ministries in national policy processes, civil society in community and advocacy structures, the UNCCD Secretariat and international bodies in global negotiation. The problem is not that these arenas exist, but that they rarely connect: actors pursue parallel efforts around a shared issue, without the exchange that would let their work reinforce rather than duplicate each other.

What connects the arenas is not a new institution, but a shared purpose, for UNCCD land tenure implementation, that purpose is the recognition and protection of legitimate tenure. Building collaboration around that purpose requires three things that do not happen automatically:

- **Translation:** making each arena's work legible to the others. A ministry's policy language, a CSO's grass-roots evidence, and a global commitment's legal text do not speak the same language.
- **Trust:** built through repeated, reliable interaction over time, not a single workshop or event.
- **Relationship-building:** the accumulated connections that let coordination function even when formal mandates are weak or absent.

Civil society organisations play a particular role here. Beyond representing affected communities, they function as a support system, holding institutional memory, translating between national, international and community levels, providing evidence. Strengthening this support function deliberately, rather than treating CSO engagement as consultation.

3. The NFP role as coordinator

NFPs occupy a structurally difficult position. They are the formal link between global UNCCD commitments and national governance systems, and are expected to coordinate across ministries, engage stakeholders, integrate data, and feed national realities back into international processes. **In many countries, they do this with limited authority, constrained budgets, and no dedicated coordination infrastructure.**

Within the implementation ecosystem, the NFP functions as a hub. It connects the arenas described above. Its authority comes from its position as connector and translator between national and global levels, not from formal control over other actors. Understanding this is important, not to lower ambitions, but to be honest about what NFPs can realistically drive, and what requires action from governments, donors, the UNCCD Secretariat, and other actors.

What NFPs can do

Within existing constraints, NFPs can act as deliberate connectors by making more strategic use of relationships that already exist rather than waiting for formal coordination mechanisms to be established. In practice, this means:

- identifying key actors working on land tenure and initiating targeted exchange
- using existing LDN processes as entry points for broader coordination
- bringing civil society perspectives into national position preparation
- documenting coordination gaps so these can be raised concretely at COP17.

These incremental actions reduce fragmentation, improve access to local knowledge, and strengthen the legitimacy of national positions. And they do not require new mandates or additional resources to begin.

Country experiences illustrate what this can look like from different starting points:



Benin

Policy entry points and civil society engagement

Benin's LDN Target Setting Programme (Target 7) provides a clear policy framework for integrating land tenure into restoration and forest governance. The UNCCD NFP has built on this by working with a coalition of civil society organizations on land rights, using joint workshops to create space for dialogue on how to operationalize tenure commitments and improve coordination around data, participation, and monitoring. These processes are still evolving, but they show how a policy entry point and structured civil society engagement can strengthen implementation without requiring new institutional architecture.

Kenya

Momentum and continuity

Kenya is using high-profile processes, including its role hosting the 2026 World Day to Combat Desertification and Drought, to bring together stakeholders working on land restoration and governance. These moments generate momentum, but the challenge is sustaining it. Relationships and coordination built around a single event or COP preparation cycle risk dissolving once that moment passes.

Madagascar

Starting from fragmentation

In Madagascar, coordination across ministries, civil society, and research actors remains largely ad hoc. Relevant expertise exists, but there are few structured mechanisms to bring actors together consistently. This makes it difficult to integrate tenure data, align policy processes, or ensure continuity beyond individual projects or workshops. Madagascar's experience is not exceptional. It reflects the starting point for many countries. It also shows where progress is possible: by identifying a small core group of actors for regular exchange, clarifying roles, and moving gradually from informal interaction toward more predictable coordination.

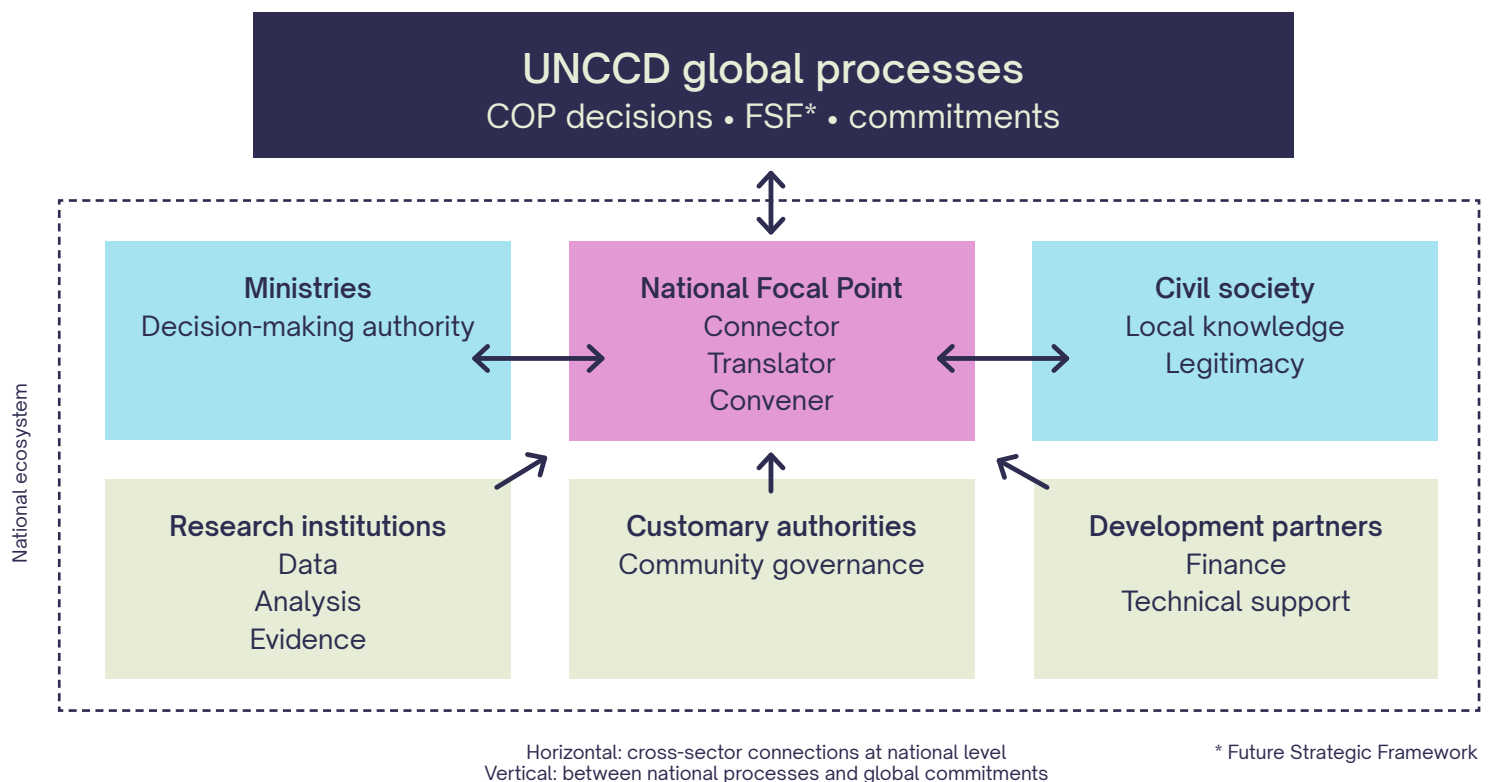
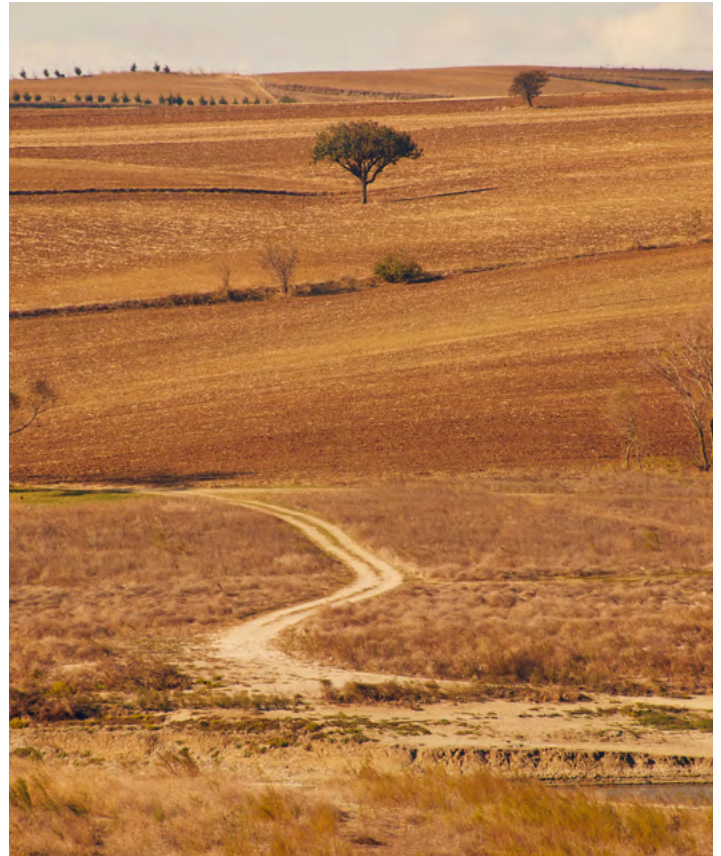


Figure 2. The NFP as a connector within the land governance ecosystem* Future Strategic Framework

What NFPs cannot do alone

NFPs cannot sustain structured coordination without institutional support. Cross-ministerial alignment requires political decisions that sit above the NFP level. Meaningful civil society engagement requires time and resources that most NFPs do not currently have. Monitoring systems that integrate tenure, participation, and accountability data require investment from donors and governments.

Placing all these expectations on NFPs, without addressing the conditions they operate in, is one reason implementation continues to fall short.



Core principles of a functioning implementation ecosystem:

Shared purpose is more important than a shared structure.

Actors do not need one system, they need one goal, here land rights, pointing them in the same direction.

Trust takes time and effort to build, but it's what makes coordination actually work.

The NFP's strength comes from connecting actors, not controlling them.

Someone has to do the translating, since policy, grassroots, and global language often don't match on their own.

CSOs are not just consulted, their steady presence keeps things stable between COPs.

Lasting connections matter most, since they keep things running even when formal mandates are weak or missing.

4. Conditions for implementation

Strengthening implementation requires action at two levels simultaneously. NFPs can take deliberate steps within their existing remit, but the conditions that determine whether those steps translate into outcomes depend on decisions made by governments, donors, and the UNCCD Secretariat. Both levels matter. Neither is sufficient alone.

What NFPs can drive

NFPs do not need to wait for new frameworks or additional resources to begin strengthening coordination. Within existing processes, there are practical steps to shift how actors work together:

- **Map the ecosystem.** Identify which ministries, civil society organizations, research institutions, and community actors are relevant to land tenure and LDN implementation, and where relationships are missing or weak.
- **Nominate a land tenure focal point.** Decision 28/COP.16 already invites Parties to consider this. Where it has not yet happened, COP17 is an opportunity to move forward. A designated focal point can reduce the risk that tenure dimensions are handled inconsistently across processes.
- **Integrate civil society early.** Rather than consulting civil society organizations at the end of national processes, bring them in during preparation. They hold local knowledge, grievance data, and implementation experience that can strengthen national positions and reduce resistance later.
- **Use COP17 preparation as a coordination moment.** Developing a national position for COP17 is itself an opportunity to convene actors, clarify roles, and establish relationships that outlast the COP cycle.

What governments, donors, and the Secretariat must provide

These steps can be initiated by NFPs, but they cannot be sustained without support. The following are baseline conditions for successful implementation:

- **Clearer mandates.** NFPs need formal authority to convene across ministries and engage civil society in structured ways. Without this, coordination depends on personal relationships and goodwill, neither of which is reliable over time, so governments must define and protect the NFP coordination role explicitly.
- **Dedicated resourcing.** Coordination has costs. Exchange, facilitation, follow-up, and technical support all require time and funding. Donors should invest in governance conditions, including NFP operational capacity, that determine whether projects deliver.
- **Practical guidance from the Secretariat.** The UNCCD Secretariat and partners should develop concrete guidance on national NFP–civil society organization collaboration models, building on Decision 28/COP.16. This should include practical options for different institutional contexts, not only best-case examples.
- **Stronger reporting frameworks.** COP17 should support clearer guidance on how Parties collect and report on legitimate land tenure rights, participation, and accountability in LDN implementation. Without this, progress on governance conditions remains invisible in global monitoring.
- **Peer exchange mechanisms.** Countries such as Benin and Kenya are developing coordination approaches that others could learn from. Structured peer exchange, supported by the Secretariat or partners, can accelerate learning without requiring each country to start from scratch.

5. A practical agenda for COP17

Before COP17

Prepare the ground

The lead-up to COP17 is a first prime coordination opportunity. Most NFPs already have informal relationships with relevant actors. The objective now is to make these interactions more deliberate and structured, without adding new processes. For instance, the national position preparation process can be used to bring in civil society perspectives early, ensuring implementation challenges are reflected in delegation priorities.

At COP17

Advocate for implementation conditions

COP17 should move beyond general calls for better implementation and focus on the conditions that make implementation possible. NFPs are well placed to carry this message because they experience the governance gap directly.

The core ask for COP17 is to encourage Parties to apply an implementation ecosystem approach that brings together relevant stakeholders and ensures structured coordination in the implementation of decisions.

In practice, NFPs can advocate for:

- Practical coordination guidance. Encourage the Secretariat and partners to develop concrete models for NFP–civil society collaboration, building on Decision 28/COP.16, alongside clearer guidance on how Parties report on land tenure rights and stakeholder engagement in LDN implementation.
- Support for the land tenure focal point role. Advance the conversation on how this role functions in practice, including its relationship to existing NFP mandates and cross-ministerial coordination.
- Donor alignment around governance conditions. Make the case that investments in enabling environments and coordination capacity are as essential as project funding.

COP17 should ensure that the expectations placed on NFPs match the conditions they are given to deliver.

After COP17

Sustain what works

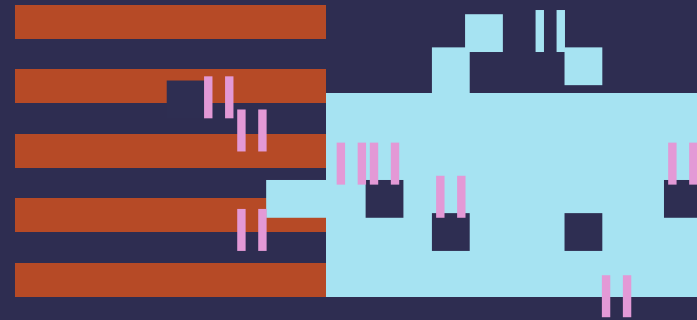
The risk after every COP is that relationships built during preparation dissolve once the event is over. Avoiding this does not require new systems, but it does require basic conditions for continuity.

For coordination to continue, countries need a clear institutional entry point within existing structures, a small group of engaged actors with a shared understanding of roles, and at least minimal resources to support follow-up and exchange.

Where these conditions exist, even lightly, coordination becomes more predictable over time. Reliance on informal relationships decreases, and implementation capacity strengthens gradually without waiting for a structural overhaul.

Making implementation possible

COP17 should not only reaffirm existing land tenure commitments but also strengthen the conditions that determine whether those commitments can be implemented. This means ensuring that tenure security and inclusive governance are reflected as enabling conditions in the Future Strategic Framework, giving NFPs clearer mandates and practical support, aligning donor investment with coordination needs, and making progress on tenure, participation, and accountability visible through stronger reporting.



The underlying shift is clear: restoration investments will not deliver at scale without tenure security; tenure commitments will not translate into outcomes without coordination; and coordination will not function without mandates, resources, and structured support.

Funded by

**& Robert Bosch
Stiftung**

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