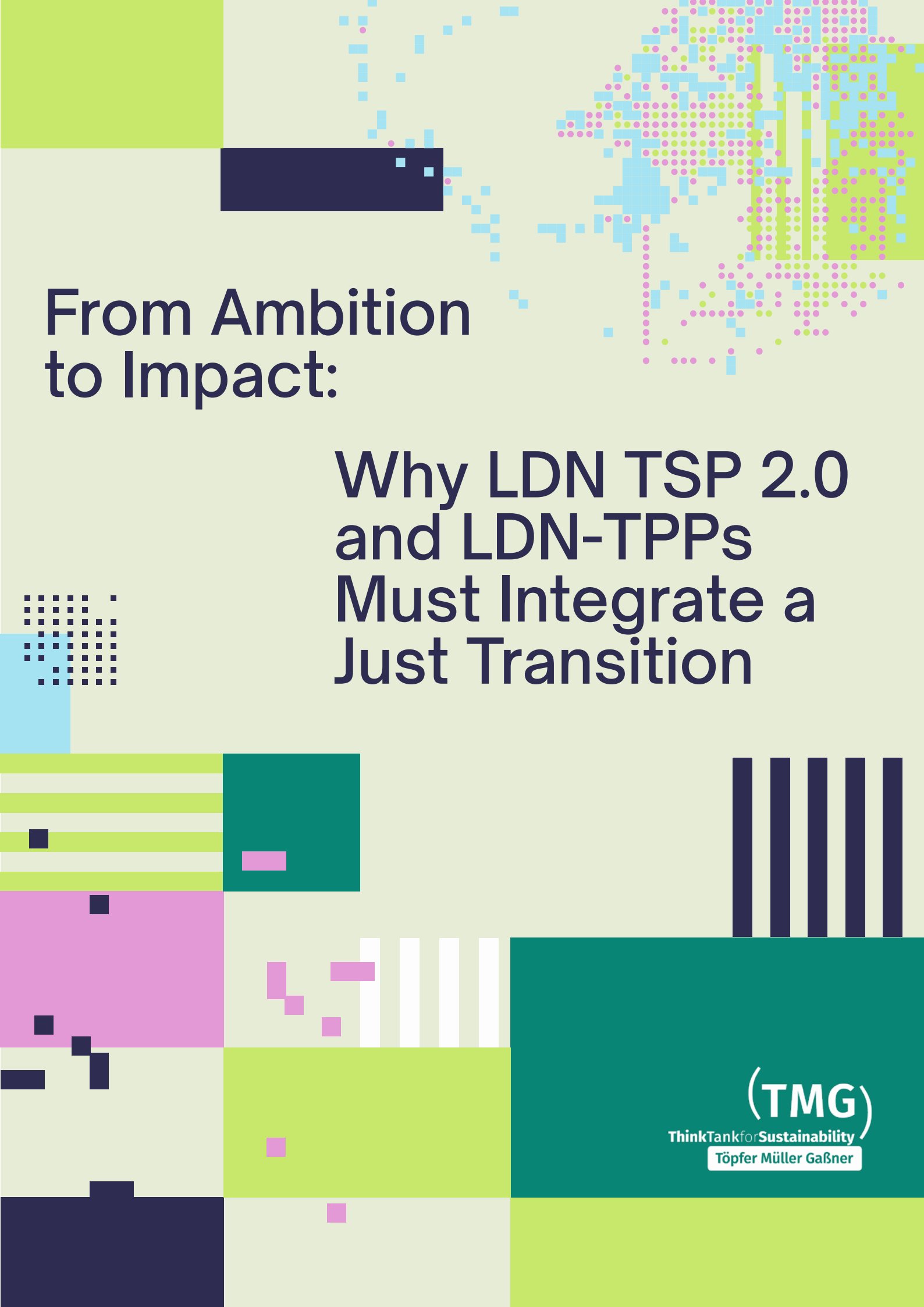




From Ambition to Impact:

Why LDN TSP 2.0 and LDN-TPPs Must Integrate a Just Transition

(TMG)
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Executive Summary

Achieving Land Degradation Neutrality (LDN) under the LDN Target Setting Programme 2.0 (LDN TSP 2.0) requires countries to move beyond technical restoration targets and systematically incorporate just transition principles into national policy frameworks. Land restoration and forest conservation policies often prioritize ecological objectives while overlooking who participates in, benefits from, and bears the costs of restoration. At the same time, national land reforms and policies have tended to focus on formalizing ownership, neglecting legitimate customary and communal tenure systems supporting rural livelihoods, as well as procedural, distributive, and restorative justice.

Evidence from research conducted by TMG Research gGmbH in Benin, Kenya, Madagascar, and Malawi shows that insufficient attention to land tenure security, inclusive governance, and accountability mechanisms has undermined community trust, heightened tenure insecurity, weakened restoration efforts, and ultimately compromised the achievement of LDN targets.

LDN TSP 2.0 presents a critical policy window. As countries update targets and design LDN Transformative Projects and Programmes (LDN-TPPs), key implementation choices are still being defined. Without integrating just transition principles at this stage, existing governance gaps risk being institutionalized at scale. While most LDN assessments focus on technical and data-related challenges, this report highlights governance and justice dimensions that directly affect implementation outcomes. To advance this agenda, the following policy recommendations are essential:

1

Integrate tenure security and safeguards into LDN TSP 2.0

Align national targets and LDN-TPPs with the Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure (VGGT) and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO)–United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) Technical Guide, including explicit provisions to recognize and protect legitimate tenure rights, including customary systems.

2

Leverage FAO–UNCCD upcoming national consultations to co-design actionable policy reforms.

Move beyond consultations as a procedural requirement by using these processes to co-design reforms, validate data, and identify implementation bottlenecks with stakeholders, ensuring policies are grounded in local realities and informed by community knowledge.

3

Institutionalize inclusive participation and accountability mechanisms:

Require that LDN TSP 2.0 processes include grievance mechanisms, monitoring systems that capture participation and social impacts, and measures to strengthen meaningful engagement with civil society, Indigenous Peoples, and local communities in restoration and forest conservation policies and programmes.

4

Strengthen capacities of UNCCD National Focal Points (NFPs):

Provide adequate resources, coordination mandates, and institutional support to enable NFPs to lead LDN implementation effectively.

5

Align restoration with livelihoods and resilience:

Ensure that LDN interventions assess and address local livelihoods, reduce vulnerabilities, and contribute to a just transition.

1. The case for a just transition in LDN implementation

Countries are redefining how Land Degradation Neutrality (LDN) will be implemented over the next decade. Through the rollout of the LDN Target Setting Programme 2.0 (LDN TSP 2.0) and the design of Transformative Projects and Programmes (LDN-TPPs), they are making key decisions about priorities, financing, implementation models, and institutional responsibilities. These decisions will determine not only how much land is restored, but how restoration happens and for whom. Eighteen countries have already developed an LDN TSP 2.0, with more than 100 expected to engage in a similar process.

A persistent gap remains. Evidence from multiple countries shows that land restoration policies continue to operate with weak integration of land tenure, participation, and accountability mechanisms (Martin et al., 2025; Stanley et al., 2025). This directly affects how restoration is experienced on the ground, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, where only 10 to 14 per cent of rural land is formally registered, with the rest held under customary and other informal tenure arrangements (World Bank, 2024). As more countries develop LDN TSP 2.0 processes, there is a risk that existing governance challenges will be scaled up.

Integrating just transition principles is therefore not an additional objective, but a necessary condition for making restoration socially accepted, feasible, and sustainable (van der Esch et al., 2021; World Bank and UNDP, 2025).

At United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) COP16, stakeholders also emphasized the importance of advancing a just transition in the land sector, particularly in agriculture and pastoralism, which support some of the world's most climate-vulnerable populations (Bradley et al., 2024; IISD SDG Knowledge Hub, 2024). However, despite the adoption of several UNCCD decisions on land tenure and inclusive governance, implementation and monitoring remain limited.

Building on findings from two TMG Research gGmbH projects across Benin, Madagascar, Kenya, Malawi, Uganda, and Niger, the brief advocates for integrating just transition principles into national land reforms and restoration policies. It also provides recommendations to support the successful implementation of LDN TSP 2.0 and LDN-TPPs at the national level.



2. The governance gap behind weak implementation

Governance frameworks that support ecological restoration while protecting livelihoods and rights are well established (Akhtar-Schuster et al., 2011; Allen et al., 2020; Röder, n.d.; World Bank and UNDP, 2025). UNCCD decisions adopted at COP14, COP15, and COP16 consistently emphasize secure land tenure, inclusive and gender-responsive governance, participatory decision-making, and stronger engagement with civil society and relevant stakeholders. These decisions align with the Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure (VGGT) and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO)–UNCCD

Technical Guide on Land Tenure and Land Degradation Neutrality, which provide practical guidance for integrating tenure considerations into restoration policies and programmes. The challenge, then, is not the absence of frameworks, but their limited translation into practice. In this context, the implementation of the UNCCD–FAO joint initiative on land tenure in Kazakhstan, Kenya, Mexico, Senegal, and Sri Lanka, together with growing requests to extend the consultations to new countries, provides an important entry point for addressing tenure security in national policies and LDN programmes.

“... invites the Parties to ensure that measures to combat desertification/land degradation and drought are carried out in a non-discriminatory and participatory way so that they promote equal tenure rights and access to land for all, in particular vulnerable and marginal groups, within the national context.”

UNCCD Decision 26/
COP.14 on land tenure

“... encourages Parties to host inclusive and participatory national level dialogues on the implementation of Decision 26/COP.14, building on all forms of available knowledge, including data generated by people in vulnerable and marginalized situations including Indigenous peoples and local communities, those living in rural areas, women, youth, and persons with disabilities.”

UNCCD Decision 27/
COP.15

“...promote inclusive and participatory national-level dialogues, including partnering with civil society organizations and relevant actors, to enhance the implementation of Decisions 26/COP.14 and 27/COP.15, building on all forms of available knowledge, with the aim of improving the livelihoods of people in vulnerable situations, including Indigenous Peoples, local communities, those living in rural areas, women, youth and people with disabilities.”

UNCCD Decision 28/
COP.16



2.1 LDN TSP 2.0 as a policy window

LDN TSP 2.0 provides an important opportunity to close this gap. Of the 196 countries committed to halting land degradation by 2030, 131 have established LDN-TSPs, which encompass policy measures and mechanisms to achieve these goals (UNCCD, 2022). After eight years of implementation, a second phase—LDN TSP 2.0—is underway (UNCCD, 2026). Existing assessments highlight technical and institutional challenges (Global Mechanism of the UNCCD, 2019), but rarely address structural governance constraints, including tenure insecurity, weak safeguards, and limited participation. If these issues remain unaddressed, LDN TSP 2.0 risks scaling approaches that reproduce existing inequalities and implementation failures. Among the first eighteen countries selected to pilot the LDN TSP 2.0 (OSS, 2025), very few have made deliberate efforts to address these structural challenges.

Benin shows how these challenges can be addressed. Through Target 7 of its new LDN-TSP 2.0, Benin calls to “respect the principles of LDN in implementing land restoration and forest conservation policies and programmes, including the application of the Technical Guide developed by FAO and UNCCD to operationalise the implementation of the Voluntary Guidelines.” This target includes four sub-targets that address:

- land issues and institutional frameworks to protect the legitimate rights of vulnerable populations in land restoration and forest conservation policies and programmes (sub-target 7.1)
- normative measures to fight discrimination against people who depend on land and forest resources, preserve their livelihoods, and strengthen their resilience (sub-target 7.2)
- secure and sustained community use rights in participatory forest and ecosystem management plans (sub-target 7.3)
- capacity-building for stakeholders on sustainable resource management and approaches that reconcile land restoration and forest conservation priorities with the livelihood needs of dependent communities (sub-target 7.4).

Benin’s example shows that addressing governance gaps is both feasible and necessary, and offers a model that other countries can adapt as they strengthen their own governance frameworks.

3. Country evidence and lessons for LDN implementation

Evidence from TMG Research across Benin, Kenya, Madagascar, Malawi, Niger, and Uganda shows a consistent pattern: LDN implementation is constrained less by technical limitations than by governance failures (Baba et al., 2022). Four lessons are particularly relevant for LDN TSP 2.0 and LDN-TPPs: participation must be meaningful, costs and benefits must be shared fairly, legitimate tenure rights must be protected, and grievance mechanisms must be accessible.

3.1 Meaningful participation in policy processes

Participatory mechanisms formally exist in many LDN target areas, but often do not give local communities, particularly vulnerable and marginalized groups, meaningful influence. In practice, participation is frequently limited to consultation rather than decision-making power.

Institutional fragmentation compounds this problem. Land tenure is typically managed by ministries responsible for land or agriculture, while environment or forestry ministries lead restoration and conservation initiatives. As a result, legitimate tenure rights are often not systematically integrated into LDN processes, despite clear international commitments.

3.2 Fair sharing of restoration costs and benefits

National programmes and restoration policies often frame landscape restoration primarily as an ecological intervention, with limited attention to who bears the costs and who benefits. Restrictions on land use, forest access, or resource management can directly affect livelihoods without adequate compensation or alternatives.

Without policies that explicitly ensure fair and equitable sharing of the burdens and benefits of restoration, LDN measures risk deepening poverty, fuelling resistance, and weakening long-term sustainability. In Kenya, restrictions linked to forest restoration directly affected the food security and incomes of forest-adjacent communities. In Benin, Madagascar, and Malawi, similar measures heightened fears of eviction and loss of access to customary lands. Landscape restoration must therefore be understood as more than ecosystem recovery: biodiversity, climate, and desertification objectives also depend on fair and equitable implementation (Meridian Institute, 2024; Banerjee & Schuitema, 2022).

3.3 Protection of legitimate tenure rights

Tenure security has been largely overlooked in LDN TSP implementation. Policies continue to prioritize formal ownership while excluding customary systems, threatening livelihoods and reinforcing procedural injustice by sidelining legitimate rights holders from decision-making.

Weak safeguards and compensation mechanisms further expose communities to rights violations. In Benin, communities facing alleged forest offences must negotiate directly with authorities and pay imposed fees, even when accusations are contested. In Madagascar, fear of reprisals and the absence of grievance mechanisms discourage communities from raising concerns or challenging administrative decisions. These dynamics highlight the need for restorative justice approaches that address past and ongoing injustices in land governance.

3.4 Accessible grievance mechanisms

Across all countries studied, communities lack effective, transparent, and accessible grievance mechanisms to resolve land and resource conflicts, especially in restoration programmes. Disputes frequently arise from miscommunication, unclear or unilateral rules, and entrenched power imbalances between authorities and local populations. The absence of grievance redress systems perpetuates insecurity, erodes trust in public institutions, exacerbates latent and open conflicts, and ultimately undermines conservation and restoration objectives.

Survey data underline the scale of this problem. More than 70 per cent of respondents across Benin, Madagascar, Kenya, and Malawi expressed concern about losing access to land and natural resources. In Madagascar's Ankarafantsika National Park, 77 per cent of households feared losing farmland. In Benin's Three Rivers gazetted forest, 95 per cent of respondents felt insecure about customary land rights, citing eviction by the forest administration as their primary concern. Around Ntchisi Forest in Malawi, women in particular reported insecurity linked to informal and unprotected land arrangements. These perceptions of insecurity directly weaken community acceptance of LDN measures.

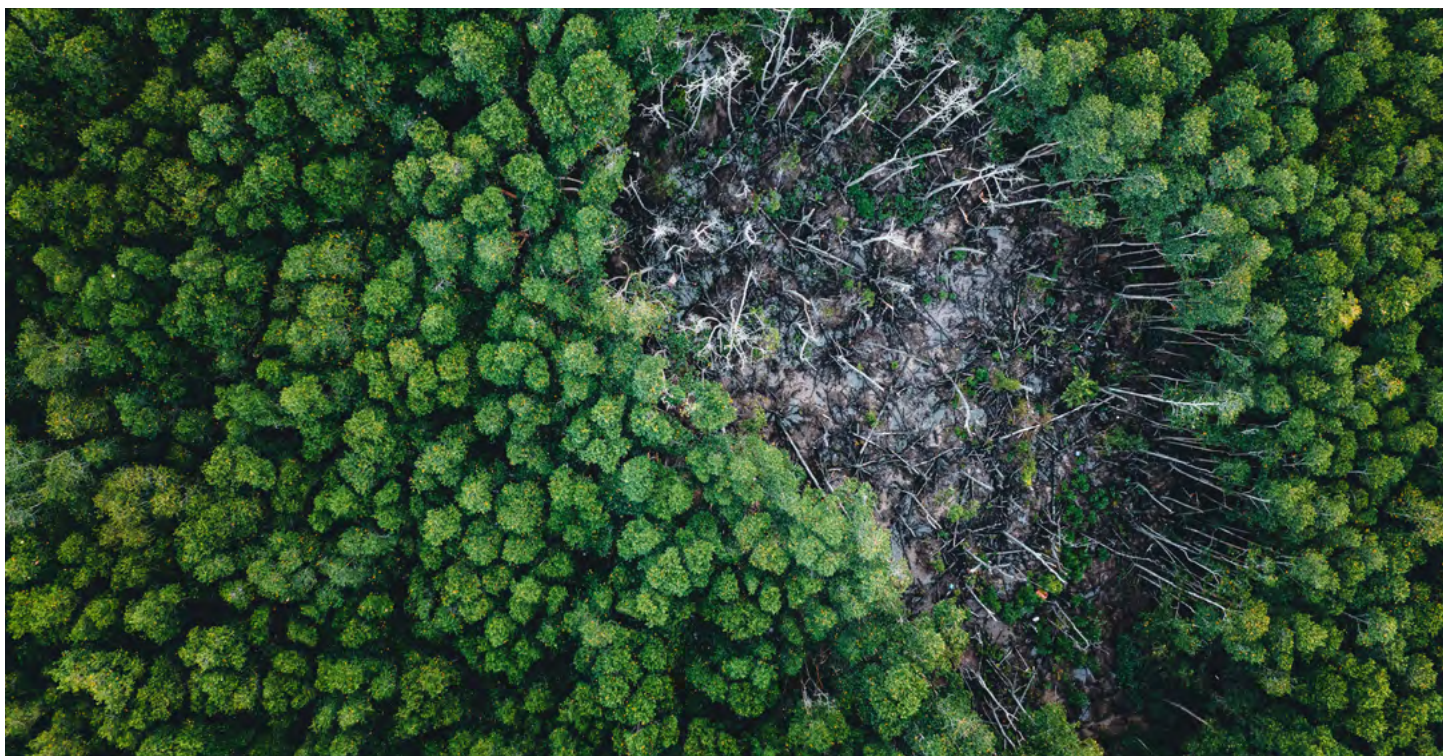
LDN implementation challenges are not accidental; they reflect underlying governance dynamics

Responsibilities for land tenure and restoration are institutionally separated

Ministries operate in silos with limited incentives for coordination

Restoration success is often measured through visible ecological outputs rather than social outcomes

Risks related to tenure and equity are externalized to local communities.



4. Implications for LDN TSP 2.0 and LDN-TPPs



The findings from TMG Research suggest that successful LDN implementation depends on national policy measures that safeguard the legitimate rights of communities who depend on land and forest resources. Without integrating just transition principles, LDN TSP 2.0 risks underperforming both socially and ecologically.

LDN TSP 2.0 and LDN-TPPs should therefore strengthen implementation processes and policy measures that reinforce trust, participation, inclusion, and accountability. If designed well, they can advance responsible land governance by aligning ecosystem restoration with social equity, livelihood resilience, and institutional legitimacy.

Benin and Kenya have shown the way forward by integrating specific targets that call for effective implementation of LDN principles and alignment with the Technical Guide on implementing the VGGT to achieve land restoration and forest conservation goals. However, targets must be translated into practical policy action, with clear monitoring and reporting on progress.

UNCCD NFPs are central to this process. They act as the interface between global commitments and national implementation, but often lack the mandate, resources, and institutional positioning to address cross-sectoral challenges. Strengthening their role requires coordination mechanisms that connect ministries, civil society, and knowledge actors.

In Benin, as in many countries covered by TMG Research, NFPs face structural constraints linked to global reporting commitments under the Convention, alongside responsibilities within their line ministries. Yet few studies have examined the capacities and enabling environments NFPs need to fulfil their roles. Successful implementation of LDN TSP 2.0 and LDN-TPPs will require stronger analysis of NFP capacities, resources, and collaboration framework, including opportunities for decision-making with national civil society organizations, which work directly with communities and hold extensive datasets and expertise.

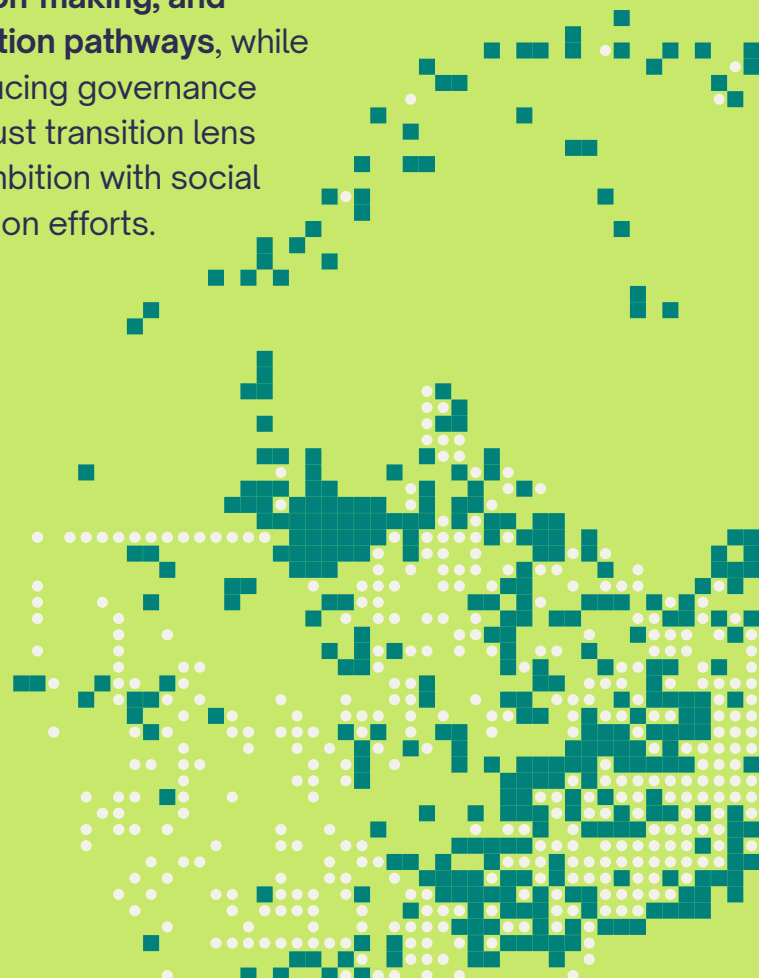
Conclusion

Evidence from transdisciplinary research in Benin, Kenya, Madagascar, and Malawi underscores a critical lesson for LDN TSP 2.0: **land restoration and forest conservation goals cannot succeed without integrating just transition principles into policies and processes.**

While countries have made progress in defining restoration targets and advancing conservation frameworks, the social, tenure, and governance dimensions that underpin these efforts remain insufficiently addressed. This risks undermining both policy legitimacy and ecological outcomes.

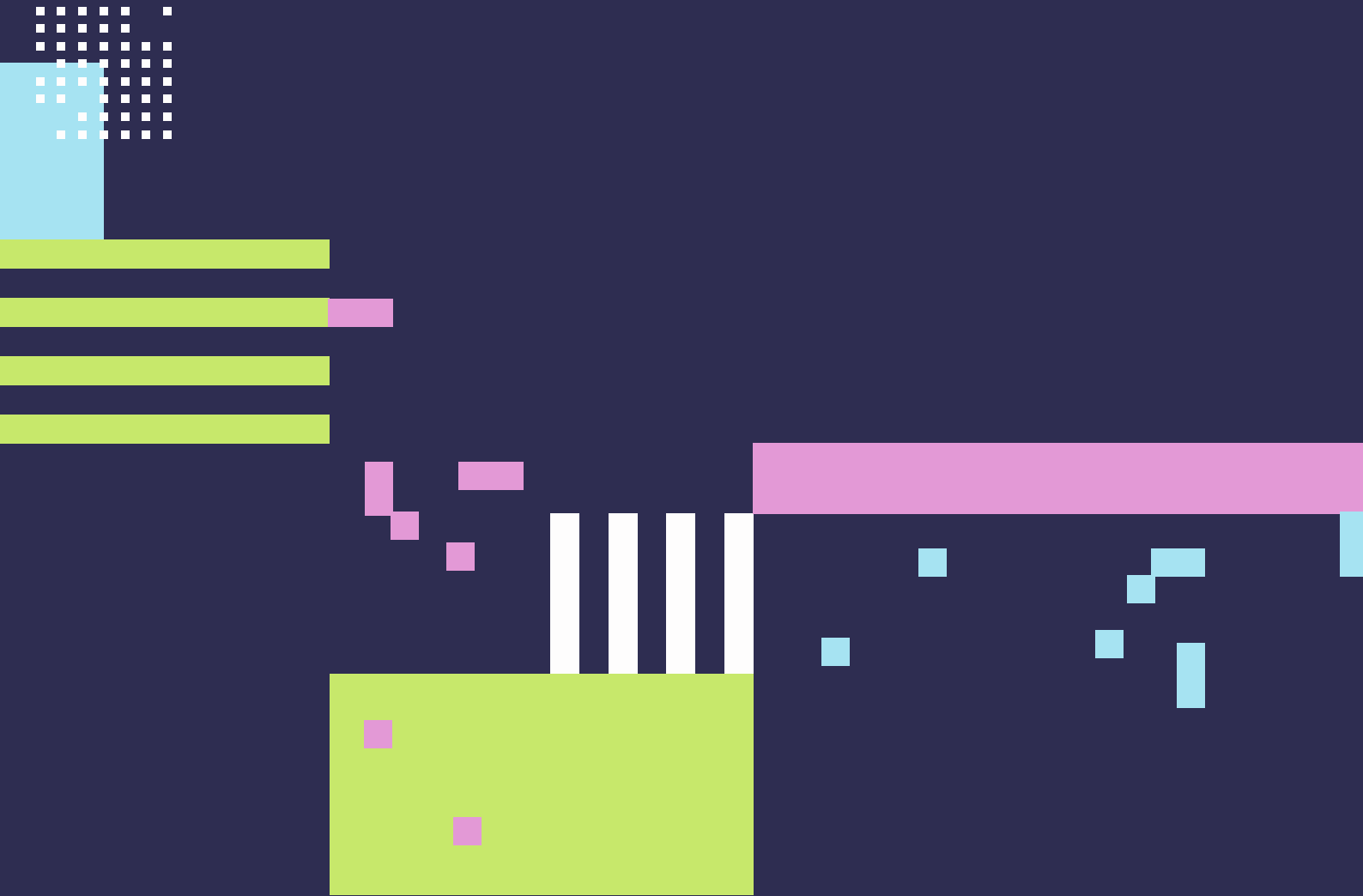
Across the countries studied, weak recognition of legitimate tenure rights, limited procedural justice, and the absence of effective grievance mechanisms have contributed to land insecurity and mistrust between communities and state institutions. Restoration measures that restrict land or forest access—when implemented without adequate safeguards, compensation mechanisms, or participatory governance—can deepen vulnerabilities, exacerbate conflict, and erode local support. These dynamics threaten the sustainability of LDN interventions and the broader objectives of biodiversity conservation, climate resilience, and rural development.

LDN TSP 2.0 represents a strategic opportunity to address these structural shortcomings. **Its success will depend on whether national policies embed tenure security, inclusive decision-making, and accountability mechanisms into national restoration pathways,** while explicitly protecting legitimate rights holders, reducing governance inequities, and strengthening community trust. A just transition lens provides a pathway to reconcile environmental ambition with social stability, enabling effective and equitable restoration efforts.



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