

Lessons for global land reform processes: A briefing note from the Scotland's Land Reform Futures International Symposium



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This briefing note was supported by the Rural & Environment Science & Analytical Services Division of the Scottish Government, as part of the [Strategic Research Programme 2022-2027](#).

Abstract

A valuable overview of land tenure issues and land reform in the Global North was provided during the 2025 *Scotland's Land Reform Futures International Symposium*, held in Aberdeen, Scotland, United Kingdom. The Symposium involved speakers and participants from across the United Kingdom, Canada, France, the Netherlands, Belgium, Sweden, Germany, Italy, New Zealand, and Japan.

A key motivation for the Symposium was the opportunity to share learning relevant to the International Conference on Agrarian Reform and Rural Development (ICARRD) +20 process, in particular the theme of 'Access to land and water and tenure security'. This briefing note provides an overview of the 'Scotland's Land Reform Futures International Symposium' and the key learnings relevant to international discussions of land and agrarian reform.

Key discussion and learning points include:

- The experience of land reform in Scotland demonstrates the potential for redistributive land reform in the Global North, enabled by Government policy, funding, and support for communities and landowners, but also that challenges remain regarding community capacity, funding availability, as well as pace and scale of change.
- In many countries in the Global North, including Scotland, private ownership of land is increasingly concentrated, and there is evidence of new trends of land financialisation and commodification, in particular relating to developing natural capital markets. These trends can increase land prices and decrease its availability, inhibiting land access for new entrant farmers and aspiring community landowners.
- There is a need for continued attention in the Global North on equity in land access to ensure ownership diversity and representativeness, and to redress marginalisation and historical injustices.
- Efficient land mapping, cadastre and administration systems are essential for equitable land distribution and responsible governance.
- There is an important role and opportunity for an 'agile' public land sector that leads by example, and the involvement of local authorities in promoting democracy in land governance.

Background

Scotland is considered to have the most highly-concentrated pattern of private landownership in Europe, with an estimated 421 owners of 50% of all rural private land¹. This is a pattern that has existed for centuries, with fewer than 1500 people owning half the land in Scotland by the end of the 19th century. Similarly, Scottish land reform is a process that began more than a century ago, but has not

¹ Wightman, A (2025). Who Owns Scotland 2024 – v2. Available online: https://andywightman.scot/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/WOS_2024. [Last updated December 2025; accessed: 22.1.2025]



yet completed the creation of fair and equitable land policies and outcomes². Since the Scottish Parliament was reinstated in 1999, the Scottish Government has progressed an agenda of redistributive land reform, driven by concerns regarding diversity, transparency, and accountability in landownership. Through legislative and funding support from the Scottish Government, rural and urban communities have been enabled to acquire land and other assets, rebalancing rights to land held by landowners and communities, with 2.7% of total land area of Scotland (213,803 hectares)³ now owned by community organisations. In 2017, the Scottish Government published a ‘Land Rights and Responsibilities Statement’, a voluntary code for landowners⁴ considered to be a world-first, and continue to pursue a human-rights based approach to land reform.

On 4th November 2025, the Scottish Parliament voted on the Government’s latest piece of land reform legislation⁵. Critically, amongst other measures, this new law brings in mandatory requirements on the owners of ‘large scale’ landholdings (over 1000 hectares in size) regarding transparency and accountability, grants powers to Scottish Ministers to intervene in land sales to reduce landownership concentration, and seeks to increase community engagement in decisions relating to land.

However, like many countries in the Global North, private ownership of land in Scotland is increasingly concentrated⁶, and there is evidence of new trends of land financialisation and commodification, in particular relating to developing natural capital markets⁷. These trends can increase land prices and decrease its availability, inhibiting land access for new entrant farmers and aspiring community landowners, and therefore challenging the Scottish Government’s goals of diversity in landownership. It raises questions regarding how to ensure that rural communities and the Scottish public benefit fairly from resulting increases in land and natural capital value, and that they are not excluded from decisions relating to land⁸.

Scotland demonstrates the opportunities and challenges of land and agrarian reform in a Global North context, in particular where land markets are open and unregulated. Private landownership in the Global North is often seen as ‘settled’⁹, and under the market-led agrarian reform programmes led by the World Bank in the 1990s, close to an ideal property regime. However, mitigating and adapting to climate change, reversing biodiversity decline, ensuring a shift to agroecological farming, sustainable

² Russell, M. (2025, November 11). Are we there yet? *The long journey to a land reformed Scotland*. Scotland’s Land Reform Futures International Symposium, The James Hutton Institute, Aberdeen, Scotland.

³ Scottish Government, (2025). Community Ownership in Scotland 2024. Official Statistics. Scottish Government, November 2025. Available online: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/community-ownership-in-scotland-2024/>

⁴ The Statement, which is mandatory for public landowners and voluntary for all other landowner types, was updated in 2022: [Scottish Land Rights and Responsibilities Statement 2022 - gov.scot](https://www.gov.scot/publications/scottish-land-rights-and-responsibilities-statement-2022/);

⁵ The Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2025: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/asp/2025/15/introduction/enacted>

⁶ Wightman, A (2025). Who Owns Scotland 2024 – v2. Available online: https://andywightman.scot/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/WOS_2024. [Last updated December 2025; accessed: 22.1.2025]

⁷ The Scottish Land Commission’s Rural Land Market Insights Report describe the natural capital market as a key factor in land purchases between 2020-2022, but 2025 illustrates a decline in land purchases for this purpose (Merrell et al., 2025). Available online: https://www.landcommission.gov.scot/downloads/684fe32f5ede6_SLC-2025-Insights.pdf

⁸ McKee A, Beingsessner N, Pinker A, et al. (2023) *The social and economic impacts of green land investment in rural Scotland*. Social Research Series, 14 December. The Scottish Government. Available at: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/social-economic-impacts-green-land-investment-rural-scotland/documents/>.

⁹ Oldham-Dorrington, O. (2025, November 11). *Scotland’s contribution to ICARRD+20*. Scotland’s Land Reform Futures International Symposium, The James Hutton Institute, Aberdeen, Scotland.



land management, and achieving a just transition to net zero economies will require land use change. Fundamental questions arise regarding the property regimes that will enable this transformation, with cases such as Scotland illustrating policy options and outcomes for landowners and communities.

The Scotland's Land Reform Futures International Symposium

The 2025 Scotland's Land Reform Futures International Symposium hosted by the James Hutton Institute¹⁰ on 11th and 12th November, with funding from the Scottish Government¹¹, provided a valuable overview of land tenure issues and land reform in the Global North. The Symposium was organised by the Scotland's Land Reform Futures research project team (including researchers from the James Hutton Institute and Scotland's Rural College), in conjunction with a stakeholder advisory group and members of the Scottish Government's Land Reform policy team.

A key motivation for the Symposium was the opportunity to share learning relevant to the ICARRD+20 process, in particular the theme of 'Access to land and water and tenure security'. This briefing note provides an overview of the Scotland's Land Reform Futures International Symposium and the key learnings relevant to international discussions of land and agrarian reform.

Symposium topics and participants

The main theme of the symposium was *Achieving collaboration, cooperation, and a just transition in land: lessons from and challenges facing Scottish land reform*. Key questions included:

- What can we learn from other countries to support land access for new entrants to agriculture, climate-friendly food production, and the Just Transition?
- What can Scotland offer in terms of knowledge and leadership in global discussions around land and rural development?
- What are the opportunities and challenges in ensuring land data transparency in Scotland and internationally?
- How do models and methods that aim to support equitable land access work in other countries, and what is the role of the public sector?

Speakers included the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands, Ms Mairi Gougeon MSP¹², and Mr Michael Russell, chair of the Scottish Land Commission, as well as land researchers and experts from across the United Kingdom, Canada, France, the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany, Italy, New Zealand, and Japan. The Symposium programme, participant list, and resource pack, is available via the Scotland's Land Reform Futures project website¹³.

¹⁰ The James Hutton Institute (www.hutton.ac.uk) is Scotland's pre-eminent interdisciplinary scientific research institute at the forefront of transformative science for the sustainable management of land, crop and nature resources that support thriving rural communities in Scotland and across the globe.

¹¹ The Scotland's Land Reform Futures International Symposium was funded as part of the Scottish Government's Strategic Research Programme 2022 – 2027.

¹² Member of the Scottish Parliament.

¹³ Scotland's Land Reform Futures project website: <https://land-reform-futures.hutton.ac.uk/>



The programme involved a plenary and breakout discussion on the key learning points relevant to the Second International Conference on Agrarian Reform and Rural Development (ICARRD) +20 process. A synthesis of the key discussion points is summarised below.

Lessons for global land reform processes

- **The Scottish case demonstrates potential for redistributive land reform in the Global North, enabled by Government policy, funding, and support for communities and landowners. Nonetheless, challenges persist regarding community capacity and resources, and the scale of land transfers remains limited.**

The primary mechanism for land reform in Scotland is through enabling the ownership of land (and other assets) by place-based community organisations. In addition to land reform legislation, the Scottish Land Commission provides guidance and good practice codes, as well as recommendations for changes in law, policy and practice to promote land reform in Scotland. With annual funding from the Scottish Government of £10 million, the Scottish Land Fund provides grants of up to £1 million to communities to buy land or other assets. Symposium participants commented that this type of Government involvement can generate a national conversation on land reform that includes the public in issues of land ownership and decision making and empowers people to influence decisions relating to land.

Despite this, Scotland has not seen significant change to the pattern of landownership and given resource and capacity constraints on the part of communities and Government, the pace of change appears restricted. The ‘willing-seller, willing-buyer’ or market-based model which operates in Scotland, which is unlike other redistributive reforms such as those made in Mexico, Ireland and Japan in the 20th century, has limitations as demonstrated in Scotland¹⁴. The opportunity to buy depends on a landowner’s decision to sell and the likelihood of a geographically-proximate opportunity. The market cost of land or assets is often out of reach for communities, and the Scottish Land Fund budget represents only a tiny fraction of the cost of Scotland’s annual land transactions. As well, unlike many other countries in the Global North, Scottish land reform does not include policy about non-tenanted agricultural land. Focussing on community bodies does not enable the redistribution of land to individual farmers, limiting access for new entrants to farming and arguably inhibiting the emergence of alternative models of agricultural production such as agroecology and diversity of tenure.

Symposium participants asserted that the model of community landownership underway in Scotland is empowering, demonstrates direct local democracy¹⁵, and delivers wider community and rural development, with community members not ‘passive recipients’ of development actions. This model may be relevant and of value in other international contexts, in particular the processes of community engagement prior to land acquisition and the representative structure of community landowning organisations. However, it should be noted that there has been limited evaluation to date of the long-term outcomes of community ownership in Scotland¹⁶.

¹⁴ Sugden, F. (2024) Global learnings for land reform in Scotland: Towards more radical solutions. University of Birmingham. Epub ahead of print 2024. DOI: [10.13140/RG.2.2.24244.36489](https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.24244.36489).

¹⁵ Doyle, C. (2023) Rethinking Communities, Land and Governance: Land Reform in Scotland and the Community Ownership Model. *Planning Theory & Practice* 24(3): 429–441.

¹⁶ This is a key workstream within the Scotland’s Land Reform Futures project.



Symposium participants also highlighted the polarised debate ongoing in Scotland regarding the value of private and community ownership. Some participants noted there was a danger of the symposium providing an ‘echo chamber’ of pro-land reform perspectives, whilst others valued the knowledge exchange and relationship-building generated by this event. This highlighted the need for greater awareness of diverse perspectives and seeking routes for collaboration.

- **There is a need for continued attention in the Global North on equity in land access to ensure ownership diversity and representativeness, and to redress marginalisation and historical injustices.**

There is some recognition of equity issues in land ownership and access in many places in the Global North, but few large-scale initiatives to address this. In the United States, the California Land Equity Task Force was created in 2023 to provide policy recommendations to address land consolidation and inequity. It proposed returning public lands to Native American tribes, funding and incentivising land acquisition for 'priority producers' to address their history of marginalisation, and establishing a Restorative Land Fund¹⁷. In Canada, evidence from incubator farms prioritizing farmland access for BIPOC, queer, and women-identifying farmers shows that land access is about safe and inclusive rural spaces (as well as affordability). In other cases, local land trusts are working to create novel pathways for current farmers to transition out of farming, while balancing the needs of incumbent and new entrant farmers¹⁸. Despite this, there is growing inequity in land ownership and access in Canada. An example from Saskatchewan, a province in Western Canada shows that even with a limit on foreign ownership of land, the number of Canadian farmers and investors with large-scale agricultural landholdings has increased over the past two decades. There is now less land put up for sale and prices are driven up in areas where investors concentrate. Land is priced at more than its productive value and serves more as a speculative asset. Access to land is now the primary barrier to the next generation of farmers¹⁹.

- **Efficient land mapping, cadastre and administration systems are essential for equitable land distribution and responsible governance.**

There is a need for more understanding and evaluation of land ownership, land tenure, and land use change, in meeting global challenges such as social and environmental justice in the Global North. This relies on rich sources of data to understand change on the ground. The Dutch Kadastre is one example - a permanent geo-information platform accessible to all that provides legal certainty about ownership and boundaries, updates land prices every quarter, tracks land transfers, and has data analysts available for specialised queries²⁰. In France, the SAFER (Sociétés d'aménagement foncier et d'établissement rural) system produces land market data continuously and publishes it annually at a

¹⁷ Calo, A. (2025, November 12). *The California Land Equity Task Force: Can a legislative reform slow the trends of farmland consolidation in the heart of America's breadbasket?* Scotland's Land Reform Futures International Symposium, The James Hutton Institute, Aberdeen, Scotland.

¹⁸ Baxter, J. (2025, December 22). *Alternative Agricultural Land Tenure Systems (ALTS) in Canada.* Scotland's Land Reform Futures International Symposium, The James Hutton Institute, Aberdeen, Scotland.

¹⁹ Desmarais, A. (2025, November 11). *Growing land inequality: The case of Saskatchewan, Canada.* Scotland's Land Reform Futures International Symposium, The James Hutton Institute, Aberdeen, Scotland.

²⁰ Spijkerboer, J. (2025, November 11). *Land data transparency and analysis: Kadaster.* Scotland's Land Reform Futures International Symposium, The James Hutton Institute, Aberdeen, Scotland.



local scale²¹. The SAFER system, although contested, provides knowledge tools and data analysis (e.g. the mapping of abandoned farmland) that underpin open debates around farmland use and regulation.

Reliable, thorough, and timely data is key to inform policy, to help evaluate potential impacts and outcomes of land policies²². It is also key to understanding what is happening on the ground, especially in situations of rapid change. For example, the speed, scale, and lack of transparency in Australian land financialisation (a trend seen in many Global North countries) exacerbated inequities between farmers and created feelings of unease and impacts on community cohesion²³. On a global level, the Global Land Observatory²⁴, a Food and Agriculture Organisation data set and knowledge sharing facility, can monitor and report on key trends and status quo on land tenure and land rights, and provide an open access database for policy makers, civil society, the private sector, and academia.

- **There is an important role and opportunities for an ‘agile’ public land sector that leads by example, and the involvement of local authorities in promoting democracy in land governance.**

An ‘agile’ public land sector can play a role in supporting sustainable agroecological food systems transformation and new entrant land access. In Flanders, public institutions are active in land markets. There are new debates on how to use public land more democratically to support sustainable and inclusive farm transitions by expanding community ownership models through public-community partnerships, rather than selling it to private owners. Regaining democratic control over the allocation of public farmland means that there is the possibility of the public having some say over land use. However, these debates are emerging in a context of ongoing sales at a much bigger scale, with no indication the pace of sales will slow down²⁵. In Wales, council farms cover 15,000 hectares and provide an exemplar of how public bodies can play a role in supporting food systems reform and enabling pathways for under-represented groups into agriculture. The case of Bremenda Isaf was described, a 100-acre lowland farm owned by Carmarthenshire County Council since the 1970s, which serves as a local hub, selling wholesale and engaging in public provisioning, community engagement, and local food partnerships.²⁶ Critically, this case aligns with the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015, which requires public bodies to consider long-term sustainability in decision-making. Public landownership in these examples, and where decision-making can be made at a more local level, is a route to enhancing democracy in land.

²¹ Baysse-Lainé, A. (2025, November 12). *The SAFERS, an evolving and multiscale tool of the French farmland regulation*. Scotland’s Land Reform Futures International Symposium, The James Hutton Institute, Aberdeen, Scotland.

²² Matthews, K. (2025, November 11). *Land data transparency and analysis: Scotland*. Scotland’s Land Reform Futures International Symposium, The James Hutton Institute, Aberdeen, Scotland.

²³ Sippel, S. (2025, November 11). *Financial investment in farmland in Australia*. Scotland’s Land Reform Futures International Symposium, The James Hutton Institute, Aberdeen, Scotland.

²⁴ The Global Land Observatory will be launched by the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) at the Second International Conference on Agrarian Reform and Rural Development (ICARRD +20) in Colombia, February 2026.

²⁵ Vandermaelen, H. (2025, November 12). *Towards a democratic appropriation of public farmland: Emerging debates and policy initiatives in Flanders on land-driven farm transitions*. Scotland’s Land Reform Futures International Symposium, The James Hutton Institute, Aberdeen, Scotland.

²⁶ Heffron, A. (2025, November 12). *Revamping the council farm estate for the 21st century: Lessons from Bremenda Isaf*. Scotland’s Land Reform Futures International Symposium, The James Hutton Institute, Aberdeen, Scotland.



Glengarry Community Woodlands © N. Beingessner, 2024

Conclusions

In her address to the Symposium, the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands, Mairi Gougeon MSP, expressed the importance of gathering knowledge and understanding of land reform from other countries, as well as the interconnections between land reform and diverse policy areas such as food, natural environment, rural development, health, social justice, and community wealth-building²⁷.

The Cabinet Secretary also highlighted the importance of collaboration:

“Land reform isn’t an area that we as a government can do in isolation or do alone, it is very much a collective effort. It requires the input of researchers, policy makers, communities, and indeed any of those interested parties. It requires an open dialogue, mutual respect, and a willingness to challenge some of the assumptions...We know that land reform is complex. It’s intertwined with Scotland’s rural economy, our natural environment, our country’s culture, and our history. But it is also necessary, being that tool for justice, sustainability, and resilience, importantly.”

The Scotland’s Land Reform Futures International Symposium sought to bring together diverse perspectives on landownership, land reform and land tenure issues in Scotland and across the Global North. The Scottish case provided a lens on potential opportunities, outcomes, and ongoing challenges associated with policies pursuing redistributive land reform via community land acquisitions in a context of increasing private landownership concentration. Insights from international case studies highlighted the key trends and options for policymakers to implement land tenure change in response to local and global challenges regarding the climate and nature crises, social inequalities, and food system transformation.

²⁷ Over recent years, the Scottish Government has sought to tackle an ambitious programme of legislative reform that seeks to bring about change in many of these areas, including the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2025, Agriculture and Rural Communities (Scotland) Act 2024, and the Good Food Nation (Scotland) Act 2022.



Acknowledgements

The Scotland's Land Reform Futures project team wish to thank all the speakers and participants of the International Symposium held on 11th and 12th November 2025, as well as members of the project Stakeholder Advisory Group, members of the Scottish Government's Land Reform policy team, and colleagues at the James Hutton Institute and Scotland's Rural College for their support.

Thanks are also extended to Dr Emma McCallum, Rural and Environment Science and Analytical Services, Scottish Government, and Professor Deb Roberts, James Hutton Institute, for their review of this briefing note.

This briefing note draws on ideas and examples shared by all Symposium participants during plenary and breakout group discussions, as well as presentations by: Adrien Baysse-Lainé, Jamie Baxter, Adam Calo, Annette Desmarais, Alex Heffron, Keith Matthews, Michael Russell, Jan Spijkerboer, Sarah Ruth Sippel, Olivia Oldham-Dorrington, and Hans Vandermaelen.

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Disclaimer: Please note that the synthesis presented in this briefing note is based on researcher interpretation and does not represent the views of the individual participants or their affiliated organisations, neither of the James Hutton Institute or the Scottish Government.

