INSPIRE Land Matters Roundtable

24 June 2026, Cape Town

On 24 June 2026, INSPIRE hosted its first Land Matters Roundtable, bringing together fifteen invited stakeholders from government, industry, civil society, academia, and community leadership to deepen the conversation on commercial projects on communally owned land.

Building from its webinar, "Inclusive Value Creation – Unlocking Commercial Projects on Communally Owned Land" the roundtable created a space for open and constructive dialogue on the opportunities, challenges, and practical actions needed to strengthen value creation. It was intended to:

- work towards establishing this topic of value creation on communally owned land as a strategic priority of country-level importance,
- engage in conversation with key stakeholders who, together, can advance our understanding of the primary opportunities and barriers to be addressed in support of value creation on community-owned land,
- create an opportunity for sharing of knowledge and gaining insights into the renewable energy industry's learnings and direction regarding development on communally owned land, as well as on financing approaches and considerations; and
- enable those present to be part of creating intentional shifts in where and how development is done in South Africa.

Through meeting these objectives, the roundtable sought to surface the principled and procedural changes needed to move away from tick-box land rights checklists - particularly for financial institutions- towards processes that are both appropriate to South Africa's history and current realities, and still financeable.

While the focus of discussion was on the renewable energy sector, the conversation acknowledged the broader applicability of these questions to other commercial sectors. The day ended with deepened understanding across the room, several concrete ideas about what is needed next in policy and practice, and a keen commitment to expand the conversation to other key players.

Approach of the day

Conversation followed a deliberately informal and conversational approach, enabling participants to work with specialist views, with accounts of lived experience, and with lessons that are already emerging, and to share their own perspectives with one another in facilitated conversations[1].

Good time was invested in helping people to get to know one another, followed by an introduction to the Land Matters project and the roundtable objectives. A check-in invited each participant to share their involvement or vantage point in the conversation, and the curiosity or question they were bringing to the table. As people shared their reasons for joining the roundtable, and their areas of interest and expertise, so a rich and broad picture of the system in the room was revealed.

Present in the space were renewable energy developers, funders, community leaders, members of Communal Property Associations (CPAs), community trusts and traditional councils, facilitators, researchers and members of government. Peoples' areas of interest and expertise ranged from those concerned with financing and funding; the policy arrangements needed to support development on communally owned land; what it took to facilitate partnership and help resolve conflict; land ownership and the history of land ownership, dispossession and elite capture in SA; renewable energy resource maps and project developments, land utilisation and land rehabilitation; consent and consent requirements; and funding.

This exercise highlighted the diversity of experience represented in the room and reinforced the understanding that unlocking commercial opportunities on communally owned land requires collaboration across a diverse stakeholder group.

An orientation session followed, in which a developer and INSPIRE's Land Matters researcher shared insights from the project (Beyond Bid Windows: Community Experiences of Renewable Energy Projects on Communal Land in South Africa - Inspire Excellence). The developer spoke about the basic principles for a successful project development process; what makes a bold approach to communal land not just principled but a genuine competitive advantage for investment; and emergent lessons and the systemic changes needed to optimise value creation. Drawing on INSPIRE's Land Matters case study on community experiences of renewable energy projects on communal land, the researcher reflected on the gap between how commercial projects on communal land are designed and how they are experienced by communities on the ground; what builds and what erodes trust from a community perspective; and what existing projects tell us we should do differently in the future.

This was followed by a recap of INSPIRE's webinar, which had opened a similar conversation. After comment and discussion on themes already emerging, participants worked in smaller groups to unpack the key enablers and restraints to value creation on communally owned land. Groups reported back to plenary with a focus on the levers most likely to produce impactful and extensive change and explored those levers that can be collectively addressed by the commercial sector. The day concluded with participants reflecting on their key insights, on actions they might take given their own positionality, and on the next steps they see for this conversation.

Main insights

History is with us

South Africa's history of colonialism, dispossession and, still in living memory, forced removals and the Apartheid Bantustan system all weigh down on communities in communally owned land. This history continues to shape what are highly localised and historically specific community identities which in turn shape responses to all manner of 'external' initiatives. Oftentimes, and as a result of memory of previous suffering, betrayals and disappointments, these initiatives are seen through the lenses of mistrust and scepticism. All this needs to be understood properly and worked with carefully and skilfully by developers, both South African and non-South African.

Land tenure, authority, and the governance gap

The question of who holds authority over communal land, and in whose interests that authority is exercised – including the diversity of governance forms and leadership styles across the country - ran through both group discussions and the plenary reflections. Participants pointed to the tension between formal legal structures and lived governance realities: leadership structures vary significantly across communities and provinces, and decisions made at the level of traditional councils do not always reflect the interests or wishes of community members, particularly those with individual or household-level land rights. The role and functioning of CPAs came up for especially critical scrutiny, with some suggesting that these bodies need to be fundamentally overhauled.

The issue of insecurity of tenure was raised not only as a barrier to bankability, though it is that, but as a deeper problem of power. When leaders do not act on behalf of their communities, or when the legal framework does not clearly specify who has authority to make binding decisions about land, the risk falls disproportionately on those with the least leverage. Participants noted that the Communal Land Bill, and the movement towards a permanent Act to replace the Interim Protection of Informed Land Rights Act (IPILRA), represent an important opportunity: but the question of who the new legislation gives power to remains open and contested.

A related point was the tendency of developers to treat communities as though they have no existing plans or aspirations for their land. When projects are imposed without understanding what communities actually value and want, the result can be active resistance and unrest or passive withdrawal from processes, both of which can harm the development or, in the case of unrest, halt it entirely. Assumptions of this kind do not only harm communities — they undermine projects before they begin.

The data and information gap

A persistent theme across discussions was the absence of accessible, open data on land potential: what land is available, what its renewable energy capacity might be, and what legal and regulatory frameworks apply to it. This gap has practical implications because it limits the ability of communities, alongside other stakeholders, to access the information needed to engage confidently in commercial development processes and make informed decisions about future opportunities. It also creates conditions for non-productive speculation: traditional authorities and/ or communities might wait for the market to move, sometimes for a decade or more, while their expectations remain unmet and their options narrow.

Participants noted that data of this kind does exist in various forms but is not being effectively accessed or shared. The result is turf-wars and duplicated effort among developers, and a general lack of alignment between what land can offer and what communities, government, and investors are actually doing with it. Making this data open and navigable was identified as an important early lever.

Bankability and the financial institutions problem

Financial institutions emerged as a specific and significant restraint. Participants observed that many financial institutions remain unwilling or unable to fund projects on communally owned land, citing insecurity of tenure as the barrier. But the group challenged this framing: the problem is not that communal land lacks security of tenure. It is that financial institutions do not yet understand the legal frameworks that govern it. The distinction matters: seen one way, the problem lies with communities and the status and ownership arrangements of their land and seen the other, it lies with institutions and insufficient institutional knowledge.

A comparison was drawn with the retail sector, where commercial development on communal land, for example, shopping malls and filling stations, has proceeded with far less friction. These projects are not structured as standalone assets requiring registered title; they are held within property funds and other vehicles that manage risk differently. The question was raised directly: if the retail sector has found workable structures, what is preventing the renewable energy financial sector from doing similarly?

The phrase that emerged from this discussion - “security of tenure doesn’t have to be land rights” - captures a practical insight: the financial system’s preoccupation with title-deed-based collateral is a convention, not a legal requirement, and one that other sectors have already found ways around.

Participants further noted that improving bankability requires both innovation in financing models and greater institutional understanding of communal tenure systems. They echoed that capacity building is necessary not only with communities but also with financial

institutions, commercial lenders, developers, and government institutions to strengthen confidence in commercially viable models for development on communally owned land.

Community as partner, not beneficiary

Both groups returned, in different ways, to the question of what it means to treat communities as genuine partners in development rather than as beneficiaries of decisions made elsewhere. This involves more than language. It requires developers to enter communities with enough time and patience to understand existing plans and aspirations; to work through the appropriate authority structures without overriding them; to simplify complex legal and financial language so that community members can participate meaningfully; and to align on what value creation actually means, in terms that are relevant to the people whose land is at stake.

Participants also emphasised that meaningful participation rests on strengthening capacity across the broader development ecosystem. While communities may require access to technical, legal, and financial information presented in accessible terms; developers, financiers, and public institutions also require a stronger understanding of communal land governance and community realities. Developing this shared understanding was viewed as essential to building trust and supporting more effective partnerships.

There is role here for skilled and knowledgeable intermediaries, but also no substitute for careful, intentional and resourced engagement with communities themselves.

Further, participants noted that community land is often the greatest single asset that a community has. This is not a sentimental point: it is a material and political one. Development that does not start from this understanding is unlikely to produce the relationships of trust that participants across the day identified as essential to making projects work. Ultimately, having real regard for communities as partners enables the possibility of community members to be their own developers, as has been shown in other parts of the world.

Enablers to commercial development on communally owned land

In summary, the following enablers to progressing commercial development on communally owned land were identified and discussed at the Roundtable:

1. **Open, accessible data on land potential**: knowing what land is available, its renewable energy capacity, its historical story and experience (e.g., what history of forced removals or resistance to/ avoidance of forced removals?) and the applicable legal frameworks enables communities and developers to make informed decisions and reduces speculative waiting.

2. **Legal and institutional familiarity with communal tenure**: financial institutions and lenders that understand how communal land rights work, and how security of tenure can be structured without formal title deeds, are able to fund projects that others currently decline.
3. **Alternative financial structures**: models used in the retail sector (property funds, non-standalone asset structures) demonstrate that bankable arrangements on communal land are achievable; applying similar thinking to renewable energy unlocks currently blocked projects.
4. **Early, trust-based community engagement**: developers who invest time in understanding community plans and aspirations before presenting their own, and who develop a practice in working through and with appropriate authority structures and in appropriate and situational ways, build the social licence that protects projects.
5. **Community preparedness**: communities that have clarified their land rights, agreed on who can negotiate on their behalf, and built their own understanding of development options are better positioned to engage on their own terms.
6. **Simplified legal and financial language**: making complex contracts and shareholding structures accessible to community members enables meaningful participation rather than nominal consent.
7. **Clarity on governance and authority**: clear processes for who holds decision-making authority over communal land, at household, family, and traditional council level, reduces the risk of disputed agreements and stalled projects.
8. **Legislative reform**: a permanent Act to replace IPILRA, and revised CPA frameworks, would provide more stable and predictable legal ground for all parties.
9. **Cross-sector collaboration and shared resources**: willingness among developers, community representatives, government, and researchers to share contacts, maps, case studies, and process knowledge accelerates learning and reduces duplicated effort.
10. **Policy engagement**: bringing policy makers into genuine dialogue, and making submissions on live legislative processes, creates the conditions for regulatory frameworks that reflect what is needed on the ground.

Reality on the ground

While this summary offers a comprehensive account of all the levers that would enable commercial development on communally owned land, the reality is that in South Africa, currently, we have some way to go towards having these all in place.

Clearly there are pockets of early, trust-based community engagement happening. While not sector-wide, the model exists, is being shared and discussed, and is demonstrably functional. However, the practice, time and resources required of developers to work in this way is not widely known, nor implemented widely.

Similarly, there are alternative financial structures in place, notably as evidenced in what is being achieved in the retail sector. Despite retail and renewable energy involving different business models, land usage and employment patterns, there is merit in learning more about how finance is leveraged in the retail sector.

Furthermore, there is also some legal and institutional familiarity with communal tenure, although this needs to be grown across legal and financial communities. Alongside this, there is also work happening at creating simplified and accessible language, but it is not yet sought out nor made available across the sector.

In reality, the enablers most dependent on individual developer behaviour are furthest progressed while those requiring institutional change, including legislative reform, open data, financial institutions policy, and cross-sector collaboration remain largely aspirational. While the will is in the room; the systems haven't caught up. It is towards progressing this sectoral and systemic change that future sector-wide energies might usefully be directed.

Concluding insights, resolutions and suggestions

The closing session invited participants to reflect individually on their key insights, on the actions they might take in their own sphere, and on what they saw as next steps for the conversation. Taken together, these reflections pointed towards a number of shared commitments and emerging directions.

Building a practical partnership

Participants expressed a desire to move from conversation to implementable partnership. There was recognition that the roundtable had surfaced significant capacity across the room: in communities, in developers, and in government, and that a next step is to understand how those capacities can be brought together with more intentionality. This includes identifying the bottlenecks and constraints that are not yet fully understood, and building the shared knowledge needed to address them.

Capacitating communities

Several participants identified community capacity-building as a priority. This was not seen as a precondition for development, but as a right in itself. This means assisting community members understand shareholding and technical language; supporting them to access information about the renewable energy potential of their land; and working to ensure that the benefits flowing from development are genuinely equitable and reach beyond formal leadership structures to those on the ground. The question of whether development is primarily about creating jobs or building intergenerational wealth was raised as one that communities themselves should be empowered to answer.

Engaging policy

There was strong interest in taking the insights from the roundtable into policy processes, including making submissions on the final tenure bill and on existing legislation governing CPAs. Participants noted that current CPA frameworks have not worked well in practice, and that reform is needed. The call was made to bring policy makers into the conversation to create the kind of genuine dialogue that could lead to aligned and effective change.

Demystifying the legal landscape

A recurring theme in the closing reflections was the need to bridge the gap between the formal legal and financial systems governing development and the customary structures and lived realities of communal land. This means demystifying how different legal frameworks, for example, energy law, land law, financial regulation, interact in practice; clarifying roles and responsibilities across all parties; and building the next generation of practitioners, within communities and institutions alike, who can navigate this landscape with confidence.

Sharing resources and expanding the conversation

Finally, participants expressed a willingness to share what they know, for example, contacts with willing landowners, IPPs, and CPAs; maps and case studies; models and processes that have worked. There was recognition that this conversation needs to go beyond the room: to bring in the stakeholders who were not present, to reach beyond elites and institutional actors to those most directly affected, and to create the kind of educational spaces, for developers, communities, and government alike, where the learning that has already happened can be put to practical use.

There was a shared and enthusiastic interest in continuing conversations of this nature, held in this way, expanding diversity in the room to include greater diversity of all levels of government, the legal fraternity, commercial lenders, foreign developers and the IPP office itself.