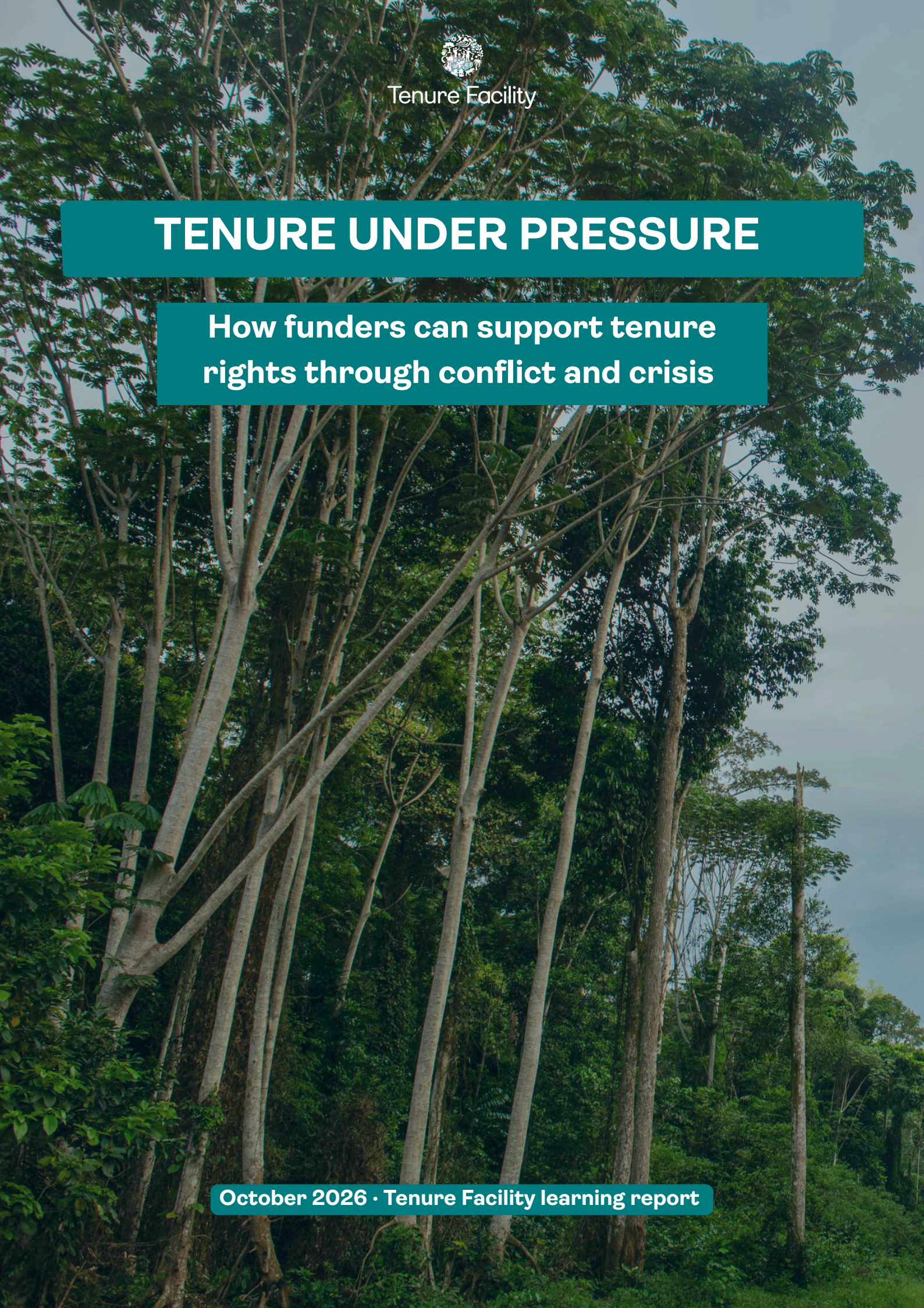

Tenure Facility

TENURE UNDER PRESSURE

How funders can support tenure rights through conflict and crisis

October 2026 · Tenure Facility learning report

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Many of the world's most important forests lie in territories governed by Indigenous Peoples, Afro-descendant Peoples, and local communities. These territories are often affected by conflict, instability, and humanitarian crises. When communities' security is imperilled, their tenure rights may also come under pressure, heightening risks of forest loss and illegal extraction and threatening hard-won climate and biodiversity gains.

Yet this is often the moment when funding becomes hardest to access. Risk thresholds tighten, standard procedures become harder to meet, and support designed for stable environments struggles to adapt.

At New York Climate Week on 22 September 2026, Tenure Facility convened Indigenous and local community leaders, human rights experts, funders, and practitioners to explore what it takes to support tenure rights through conflict and crisis. The message was clear: communities do not leave when crisis arrives. They keep governing their territories, protecting forests, and defending their rights, even as fighting reaches their villages, banks close, and offices shut.

The question for funders is not whether to stay with them, but how. Doing so takes more than flexibility. It means keeping resources flowing, protecting community institutions, and shifting decision-making power closer to those managing risk on the ground.

At a glance: What funders can do

Keep funds moving. Pre-approve emergency funds, agree on secure payment channels, and decide in advance how requirements can shift when banks and offices close.

Maintain support and protect what communities have built. Keep funding community institutions, tenure work, frontline leaders, gender equality, and youth inclusion when other funders withdraw.

Fund directly and on equal terms. Fund trusted organisations directly and for the long term, with legal and technical support and shared decision-making.

Keep funds moving through conflict

Funding can continue through conflict when local partners consider the approach safe and workable, and judge that the potential benefits outweigh the possible drawbacks. That judgement should account for threats partners face, such as criminalisation, extortion, or exposure. As participants at the New York Climate Week session noted, funders face far less risk than communities, so they should share the burden rather than transfer it. A more equitable approach gives local organisations and communities the resources, flexibility, and decision-making power needed to navigate crises on the ground.

The seven practices below come from our experience with Indigenous and local community partners in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), where conflict has made securing recognition of their tenure rights more urgent even as government institutions responsible for approving land claims have slowed or stopped processing. Many partners from the region were prevented from attending New York Climate Week because they could not obtain US visas due to the Ebola outbreak—one example of the barriers partners must manage. While rooted in the DRC experience, the practices can apply wherever conflict, disease, or other crises disrupt tenure work.

> “
>
> In a crisis, the first duty is to partner staff, not to the logframe.
>
> Participant at Tenure Facility’s “Tenure Under Pressure” session at New York Climate Week

Two principles underpin all seven practices: plan for infrastructure failure and other foreseeable events at the design stage, rather than improvising; and never simply drop a requirement—replace it with an agreed alternative that keeps spending accountable.

1. **Put lives before projects.** Protecting partner staff comes before project compliance. Everything else follows from that.
2. **Write a security plan into every high-risk grant.** Provide for a contingency budget line, available from the outset of a security flare-up, so crisis spending stays visible and accountable.
3. **Pre-approve emergency funds with a named signatory.** Partners can then request a decision and act within a day. Approving the reallocation of indirect costs in advance also means the funds are already available to them.
4. **Secure payment channels before you need them.** Negotiate with banks in your home country to allow transfers to countries experiencing armed conflict, and plan for alternatives such as mobile money.
5. **Agree on a conflict protocol up front and keep compliance risk off partners.** Set out which deviations are acceptable and what documentation replaces the standard requirements. Commit in writing that partners will not be penalised for payments or actions forced on them by armed actors and agree how such incidents will be documented.
6. **Keep accountability through documented alternatives.** Document each deviation from standard practice, hold a quarterly conversation with the partner, and accept alternative evidence such as mobile-money statements.
7. **Let the calendar move, not the ambition.** A crisis can delay project implementation by months. Say up front that timelines can be extended.

Case study: Eastern DRC

Using these practices, Tenure Facility and our partners in eastern DRC have kept working amid a shifting conflict. In January 2025, armed groups took over areas in North Kivu and South Kivu provinces, affecting four of our partner organisations. Banks closed, offices became inaccessible, and staff were evacuated. Since May 2026, an Ebola outbreak has compounded the crisis.

When an armed group moved into one partner’s project area, the partner activated the security plan in its grant and requested emergency funds. We approved them within a day. In such contexts,

standard compliance procedures can become impossible, so we worked with partners to adjust requirements.

Standard requirement	Reality amid conflict	Agreed replacement
Bank transfers and statements	Banks closed; salaries could not be paid through a bank	Mobile money, with mobile-money statements as evidence
Cash holding limits	Cash was the only option	Higher agreed cash ceilings
Signed paper contracts	Nobody could travel	Electronic signatures
Timely tax payments	Taxes left unpaid, on the government's own advice	Deferred tax, with the amount provisioned
Standard misconduct rules	Coercion and extortion by armed actors	A written commitment not to penalise forced payments or actions, with incidents documented
Fixed project timelines	Work disrupted and delayed	Extended timelines with unchanged goals

Partners also adapted their tenure work to what was possible: advancing titling where authorities kept processing applications and strengthening community forestry and governance bodies where they did not. Despite these constraints, work continued in every project: communities kept mapping their territories, local governance bodies implemented plans to steward their forests, women kept organising, and more. Accountability also continued, with partners completing two full audit cycles amid conflict.

Ley Uwera, right, Democratic Republic of the Congo

Maintain support and protect what communities have built

Speakers described communities continuing their work amid active fighting, even as some outside actors withdrew. Communities kept mapping their territories and governing through local committees while government offices were closed. Women described how conflict, floods, and epidemics affect them differently. In this context, funders can support in various ways:

> “We don’t run away, we don’t migrate. You still find us where you found us.
>
> Participant at Tenure Facility’s “Tenure Under Pressure” session at New York Climate Week

- **Maintain support when conflict hits.** When fighting escalates, funders may need to change how they engage, not whether. Support shaped around partners’ own security assessments, delivered remotely or through other safe arrangements, can help communities strengthen control over their territories, reinforce their governance, and take part in humanitarian response.
- **Keep tenure work moving even if the state stalls.** Where government offices are inaccessible due to conflict or public health crises, support mapping, evidence-gathering, and dossier preparation, so recognition can move when offices reopen.
- **Fund institutional continuity, not only projects.** Keep local committees and community assemblies running, and protect the rights and documentation built over years.
- **Protect frontline leaders.** Community leaders and defenders are often targeted first, so flexible funding should cover their safety.
- **Recognise that women’s needs differ.** Gender-based violence rises in conflict-affected situations, so back Indigenous and local community women’s funds, women’s leadership, and community-led protection.
- **Stay in close contact and connect your partners.** Keep frequent, secure communication with partners on the ground through regular check-ins. If one partner is cut off, others in the same country may be able to relay information and support.

Fund directly, flexibly and on equal terms

Participants called for more direct, long-term funding to organisations that communities already trust, with greater flexibility and shared decision-making. In one example from a conflict-affected context, Indigenous organisations backed by strong allies challenged a lender-backed forestry reform that threatened their ancestral forests. Their complaint was upheld: the lender’s board found it had failed to apply its own Indigenous Peoples policy and committed to doing so, creating leverage for wider mobilisation and later legal gains. Flexible practices for funders include:

- **Fund trusted organisations directly, on terms they can meet.** Small community organisations are credible and efficient, but short deadlines and requirements for legal documents, bank accounts, or late-night video calls can shut them out. Where local organisations already operate, fund them directly, and use intermediaries only as a pathway towards larger direct grants.

- **Commit long term, with room to redirect.** Conflict can intersect with floods, drought, and epidemics, so partners need multi-year funding they can shift quickly when a new crisis hits.
- **Pair funding with legal, technical, and financial management support.** This support helps communities secure and sustain recognition of their tenure rights, use safeguard and grievance mechanisms, manage forests, and report back to their own assemblies.
- **Share power in the partnership.** Co-design strategy with partners rather than asking them to fit your terms. As one participant put it, “Don’t just give me money, hold my hand.”

The takeaway for funders

Conflict does not make effective, accountable funding impossible. It changes what effective funding requires. Funders can remain rigorous while adapting procedures, sharing risk, and continuing to back the institutions communities rely on. The experiences shared here show that flexibility and accountability are not opposites: with preparation, trust, and agreed alternatives, both can hold through crisis.

Share what works

Funder networks say donors most need practical examples of how procedures have changed. If you are adapting yours for conflict-affected areas, we would like to hear from you and help share what you have learned. Contact Kaleigh Carlson, Donor Learning Lead, at kcarlson@thetenurefacility.org.

We thank Dr Albert K. Barume, UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, for his opening reflections, and Birgitte Feiring, Chief of Staff to the Special Rapporteur, for moderating. We are deeply grateful for our speakers: Jane Meriwas, Samburu Women Trust; Dominique Bikaba, Strong Roots Congo; and Adrien Sinafasi Makelo, Dignité Pygmée. We also thank Théophile Gata Dikulukila at the Support Centre for Sustainable Management of Tropical Forests (CAGDFT) for his contribution, along with all participants and interpreters who made the “Tenure under pressure” session such a candid and practical conversation.

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