SECURING PROPERTY RIGHTS FOR WOMEN AND MEN IN RURAL BENIN

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KEY MESSAGES

1. Women in Sub-Saharan Africa are less likely than men to own land. They also use less land and have lower tenure security over the land that they use. This gap is costly in terms of lost productive output.

2. Our early results showed that improved tenure security through land demarcation increased long-term investments in cash crops and trees and erased the gender gap in land fallowing—a key soil fertility investment.

3. It is important that interventions cover as much of a household’s landholdings as possible: we found that some women shifted their agricultural production to plots of land that did not benefit from demarcation so that they could guard these less secure and less productive plots.

Throughout Sub-Saharan Africa, policymakers seek instruments to strengthen the property rights of landowners and farmers in rural areas, where customary laws and norms tend to shape people’s access to and ownership of land. Under customary property rights systems, women often have uncertain land rights and less access to productive inputs. To address this, policymakers are increasingly looking to legal instruments that can secure property rights for women and men, recognizing that secure property rights can be a powerful tool to promote gender equality and economic development.

law, women typically obtain secondary land use rights through a male spouse or relative. These undocumented rights can evaporate in the event of a spouse’s death or divorce. The lack of secure land rights for women and men can lead to under-investment and lower agricultural yields.

The typical policy response to the challenge of under-investment in land has taken the form of costly and time-consuming land titling programs. The World Bank’s Doing Business 2014 report indicates that the property registration process across the region requires six steps and 120 days to complete on average, leading to a cost of about nine percent of the total property value. Moreover, freehold titling programs tend to ignore the importance of customary law in shaping land access and use in rural contexts. This situation highlights the need to make land administration programs more efficient and cost-effective and to embed these programs within existing customary laws.

SO WHAT TO DO ABOUT IT?

The Rural Land Use Plans (Plans Fonciers Ruraux, PFR) in Benin represent a more decentralized, low-cost approach to land rights formalization. The PFR program is innovative in its focus on the formalization of existing customary rights of individual landholders. The objectives of the program are to improve tenure security and stimulate agricultural investment in rural areas.

The Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) – through its compact with the Government of Benin – provided technical and financial support to the PFR program. The program formalizes customary rights of rural households through two main steps. First, the program demarcated all land parcels in a community, assigned land rights through a full land survey and laid cornerstones to serve as clear markers of property boundaries. Second, the program will deliver land certificates to households.

The World Bank’s Africa Gender Innovation Lab, in collaboration with researchers from the Development Research Group and the Paris School of Economics, set out to evaluate the PFR program’s impact through a randomized controlled trial. This study provides the first set of experimental evidence on the causal impact of a large-scale land formalization program.

HERE’S WHAT WE DID

To establish a rigorous estimate of the program’s impact, the research team relied on a unique feature of the program roll-out. All PFR villages were selected through district-level lotteries that provided a public and transparent identification of program and comparison communities. One year after the start of implementation, a survey was conducted in 291 of these communities to compare differences in outcomes between the randomly-chosen PFR and non-PFR villages. The survey encompassed an expansive geographic area including data from 9 of Benin’s 12 regions. The study sample covered households with at least one parcel of land in their village, including 2,972 households with a total of 6,094 parcels.

The researchers set out to study the initial impact of the first step of the program – land demarcation – on agricultural investment in Benin, prior to the issuance of land certificates. The resulting short-term effects shed light on the investment impact of integrating customary land tenure systems into the formal system of land rights.
HERE’S WHAT WE FOUND

**Improved tenure security through land demarcation increased long-term investments in cash crops and trees and erased the gender gap in land fallowing—a key soil fertility investment.**

The demarcation of parcel boundaries led to an initial increase in tenure security as reported by the household head’s right to sell land. These tenure security effects translated into an increase in long-term investment, both in trees and perennial cash crops, for both male-headed and female-headed households. One year after the start of land demarcation, participant households increased their investments in cash crops such as oil palm and teak by 39 percent and tree-planting by 43 percent – relative to the comparison group. These findings point to a substantial increase in long-term land investment.

Early results also showed that the program erased Benin’s gender gap in land fallowing, a vital practice to replenish soil fertility. Female headed-households in PFR communities were more likely to fallow their land when compared with both male-headed households in PFR villages and male-headed households in comparison villages. Strengthening women’s land security may have allayed their fear of land loss during fallow, leading them to undertake this important investment.

The program also engendered an initial shift in agricultural production among female-headed households when faced with changes in their relative tenure security following demarcation.

Since the land demarcation program covered most but not all of the lands held by smallholders, early results from the study found that some women farmers moved their agricultural production from secure demarcated land within the village to land outside the village to guard those parcels that had not been demarcated. This shift could be driven by underlying gender differences in tenure security. Following demarcation within the village, women likely feel more secure about the demarcated land they control within the village boundaries and opt to move their production and farm labor to relatively less secure land outside the village to protect it. In comparison, men would be less likely to respond in this manner since they already have relatively secure tenure claims – even on the non-demarcated land outside of the village. The response of women farmers, however, results in a drop in farm yields on parcels within the village, leading to a 22 percent widening of the overall gender gap in agricultural productivity.
CONCLUSION

The early findings from this study highlight the complexity of rural land issues, but also offer promising policy recommendations. Hybrid land formalization interventions that recognize customary land rights can lead to important increases in investment in cash crops and tree crops for women and men and fallowing for women, even after a short period of time. Meanwhile, this study also highlights the need for a spatially comprehensive approach to land registration – through the inclusion of all lands held by rural households – to ensure that those with weaker property rights share in the full benefits of the program. A new round of data collection, which took place earlier this year, will shed light on the longer-run impact of demarcation on women and men.

For more information on this study, download the World Bank Policy Research Working Paper:

http://goo.gl/QttzZO