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Did the Ethiopian Land Registration Improve Women’s Land Rights and Increase Adoption of Soil Conservation?

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Abstract

Increasing productivity and incentives to invest in soil conservation techniques are often cited as a rationale to strengthen and document land rights. An early study of a low-cost, community-based land registration effort in Ethiopia, based on a survey conducted three years after start of implementation, found that, while the registration process was not biased against the poor, its gender impact was limited, with low female participation and only a fifth of land administration committees having a female member, even if this was required. The study also found positive initial impacts on households’ undertaking new land-related investments in the last 12 months.

This paper revisits this issue by analysing the medium-term impact of the Ethiopian land registration on household investment behaviour, particularly the adoption of soil conservation techniques and tree planting, using data from the 2009 round of the Ethiopian Rural Household Survey, six years after the start of the land registration effort. The survey covers 1500 households in 15 villages broadly representative of the country’s agroecological zones. It examines whether households’ knowledge of their property rights under the land registration (as measured by answers to a list of questions regarding the provisions of the registration) has an impact on these investments. We attempt to unpack the “bundle of rights” under the land registration into three categories: tenure security, land transfer rights, and rights related to gender equity and inheritance. We investigate whether knowledge about a particular part of the bundle of rights has a greater impact on land-related investments, such as soil conservation and tree planting. We then examine whether gender differences in knowledge of property rights within the same household and across different bundles of rights have a differential impact on tree-planting and soil conservation, differentiating by gender of the household head and the plot manager. Answering this question contributes to the growing literature on the role of legal knowledge in enabling women to benefit from interventions that strengthen their property rights.

Keywords: Ethiopia, gender, land rights, legal knowledge, soil conservation