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Land reform and agropastoralism in northern Benin: Reconfiguring resource access and mobility

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Abstract

Benin's land reform, particularly formalisation processes, aims to improve tenure security and incentivise long-term agricultural investment. However, implementation intensifies competition over land and disrupts traditional land-use systems, often to the disadvantage of communal grazing resources and pastoral mobility. Moreover, recent policy measures, including the national prohibition on transhumance, further complicate mobility and heighten land-use conflicts. This study examines the interactions between formalisation processes and local land-use relations in Tchaourou commune. We analyse how these processes shape land use, mobility, and communal resource management among agropastoral communities. This contribution is based on extended ethnographic fieldwork that utilises qualitative methods such as participant observation (including visits to farms and the homes of the study group, and involvement in herding activities), informal interviews, focus group discussions, and engagement with state and non-state actors. By combining narrative and document analysis, we examine how statutory land reforms are experienced, contested, and negotiated in everyday land-use practices. The findings show that formalisation processes reconfigure local land use arrangements, shifting access and management from shared and open systems toward fragmented, privatised holdings. These enclosures prompt ongoing renegotiation of access and are associated with declining herd sizes within the commune. Additionally, the loss of open corridors compels herders to move livestock through public roadways and cultivated fields, increasing the risk of crop damage and resource conflict. Despite these, agropastoralists adapt by growing forage, purchasing crop residues, and negotiating mobility. However, the growing importance of cash crops in the region, such as cashew, and new local regulations on rice farming along riverbanks further constrain access to land and water

resources. Reflecting on these findings, we discuss how land reform as an institutional innovation produces differentiated outcomes shaped by local contexts and practices.

Key words: Agropastoral systems, land reform, land use, northern Benin

Introduction

Agropastoralism, the integration of crop cultivation and livestock keeping, is organised around seasonal mobility and negotiated access to land. In Benin, these practices are predominantly associated with Fulani communities, whose socio-cultural identity and livelihood strategies have historically been rooted in livestock, mobility, and lineage-based arrangements governing access to land and water (Bierschenk, 1996; Djohy, 2017; Schareika, 1994). In Tchaourou commune, these negotiated access arrangements are increasingly constrained by crop farming expansion, agricultural intensification programmes, and demographic growth. Formalisation thus enters a contested field of ongoing territorial practices, where crop farming and visible land use forms, such as tree planting, can strengthen land claims. Moreover, recent modalities for pastoral monitoring enacted in 2023 and 2024 introduce new constraints on agropastoral systems. While these measures are designed to mitigate farmer–herder conflicts and promote social cohesion, the decrees also reconfigure tenure relations in ways that produce new forms of exclusion and contestation. The interaction between statutory interventions and overlapping tenure systems produces differentiated outcomes across local contexts. This study examines how formalisation processes shape land use, mobility, and communal resource management among agropastoral communities.

Methodology

This ethnographic study was conducted in Tchaourou commune, northern Benin. Fieldwork involved extended stays in agropastoral communities, including visits to farms and homes of study groups, participation in herding activities, and observation of land-use and mobility practices. Data collection methods included informal conversations, interviews and focus group discussions with pastoralists, farmers, and state and non-state actors involved in land and resource governance. We followed cases of farmer–pastoralist interaction to examine how different actors negotiated resource use. We also examined policy documents to analyse institutional measures and assess how these measures shape pastoral mobility. We analysed field notes and interview transcripts using thematic analysis, and policy documents using document analysis.

Results and Discussion

Land reform is encountered through statutory interventions and administrative procedures; it is also visible in evolving land use practices. The findings show how these practices create forms of enclosure. The growing importance of cash crops such as cashew in the region contributes to the enclosure of grazing areas and the fragmentation of pastoral routes. These changes contribute to a shift towards more privatised landholdings, while access to land and shared resources is increasingly negotiated. In the commune of Tchaourou, new regulations have been introduced on farming lowland riverbanks. Farmers and pastoralists share and compete for land and water resources, increasing tensions that also take on ethnic dimensions. Such disputes are often mediated by local and state institutions. Herd sizes are also declining in the commune. Amid these transformations, sedentarisation policies and stricter controls on livestock movement are reshaping pastoral systems. Pastoral groups are increasingly integrating crop farming with livestock keeping, growing forage and purchasing crop residues, while adapting their transhumance practices.



A young Fulani boy cuts tree leaves to feed livestock (Boukoussera, January 2025)
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Conclusions and Outlook

The findings show that land reform and land use changes affect pastoral systems. Increasing enclosures constrain pastoral mobility. These changes deepen existing disparities in access to land and threaten the viability of agropastoral systems by intensifying competition over resources and fuelling new forms of conflict among pastoralists and farmers. From a policy perspective, these findings suggest the need for more inclusive land governance that responds to local realities. This requires supporting community participation and creating spaces for meaningful dialogue among all stakeholders, including pastoralists, farmers, local authorities, state institutions and development partners. Such efforts should also recognise and support traditional institutions in mediating resource conflicts.

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