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Importance of land tenure for agricultural development: A review

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Abstract

Over the past 25 years, a growing body of research on land tenure has showed that tenure security is critical to various development outcomes, including adoption of technologies and natural resource management practices that contribute to equitable, efficient, and sustainable food production, resilient livelihoods, and empowerment of rights holders. Research has also shown complex interactions between tenure and a range of outcomes, especially in cases of legal pluralism or land tenure reforms.

In a systematic review of 178 empirical papers encompassing 215 country case studies in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, we synthesize evidence from the literature regarding the effects of land tenure security on several agricultural development outcomes in areas with agriculture, pastoralism, and forestry land uses. Specifically, we analyse land tenure effects on technology adoption, agricultural productivity, income, climate resilience, women's empowerment, food and nutrition security, migration and livelihood diversification, and conflict, across a wide range of land tenure indicators and interventions.

We classify the associations between land tenure security and the various development outcomes considered, noting positive, negative, mixed, and inconclusive or insignificant effects. Our review shows clear positive patterns between land tenure security and technology adoption, especially for long-term investments. The evidence is also largely positive for productivity, income and food security. The majority of cases examining women's empowerment also found positive outcomes, but there were a several negative effects, highlighting the importance of context and nuances of tenure arrangements for women. Fewer studies addressed migration/ livelihood diversification and conflict. Of those that do, the majority of cases, especially in agriculture land use cases, showed positive effects, but the proportion of negative links to tenure was higher for these two types of outcomes compared to other outcomes studied. Negative effects on conflicts and migration/ livelihoods were also often associated with pastoralism land uses.

Understanding existing contextual tenure arrangements is key for practitioners, to anticipate whether tenure is likely to limit the uptake, impact, or equity of outcomes from their interventions. Land titling interventions should beware of potential negative consequences for certain groups and with presence of other customary systems, especially in contexts with multiple land uses.

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