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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, the implementation processes intensify competition over land and disrupt 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 the farm, 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.

Keywords: Agropastoral systems, formalisation processes, land reform, land use, northern Benin

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