

Effect of land reform and natural resource management (NRM) on intermediate social cohesion outcomes

Property rights have a large effect on improving respect for ownership and reducing land-related conflicts.

Geographic region: Sub-Saharan Africa

Effect: Large effect ($g=0.826$)

Confidence in study findings: Medium (1 study with 2 effect sizes)

Short Summary

A land tenure reform in rural Benin, designed to formalize property rights by converting informal communal claims into legally recognized individual ownership, demonstrated large positive effects on social cohesion outcomes. The randomized controlled trial showed significant reductions in resource appropriation and improved respect for property in treated villages. These findings suggest that formalized ownership not only reduces conflicts but also promotes mutual trust, cooperation, and social stability. Overall, the cell is rated as medium confidence due to evidence from a single, but rigorously designed, impact evaluation.

Long summary

The intervention

The intervention focused on transforming informal communal land rights into officially recognized individual property rights. This involved documenting and registering land parcels to grant individuals legally protected ownership. The reform aimed to enhance tenure security, clarify land boundaries, and reduce disputes arising from overlapping or informal claims.

How the intervention is expected to work

Formalizing land ownership is expected to strengthen social cohesion by fostering respect for property rights and reducing conflicts. Clear, legally recognized ownership reduces ambiguity over land claims, encourages responsible land use, and provides incentives for investment. This process helps shift social norms toward mutual respect and cooperation, lessening the need for external enforcement. In turn, improved security of ownership fosters trust among community members and supports more stable, peaceful relationships.

The evidence base

The cell contains 1 impact evaluation set in rural Benin. A randomized controlled trial was implemented, where villages were randomly assigned to a land tenure reform program.

Evidence findings

The formalization of property rights produced a large effect on improving social cohesion outcomes. It significantly increased respect for others' ownership, reduced land disputes, and strengthened cooperation within communities. The intervention also enhanced social trust by clarifying ownership boundaries and reducing tensions over resource use. While impacts were consistently positive, variation across localities indicates that sustained progress depends on institutional adaptation and continued community engagement.

Included studies

Fabbri (2021) This study examines the impact of formalizing private property rights through a randomized land tenure reform in West Africa, specifically in the Coffou province. The reform aimed to secure private property rights and assess its influence on individuals' respect for others' property. The intervention was implemented at a large scale and was unique in being carried out as a randomized control trial (RCT). The study utilized a modified dictator game to measure the effect of the reform on individuals' behavior toward appropriating resources from others. Participants were residents of villages randomly selected from the land tenure reform lottery pool, with 16 experimental sessions conducted in February and March 2017. Villages were divided into treatment (reform-experienced) and control (no reform experience) groups. The study found that the formalization of private property rights significantly reduced individuals' willingness to appropriate resources from others. Participants in villages exposed to the reform took fewer coins from passive participants' endowments compared to those in control villages. Graphical analysis and statistical tests revealed that treated participants appropriated significantly less of the passive players' endowment (p -value < 1%). The reform led to a 40–60% reduction in the amount appropriated by dictators on average. The proportion of participants who took no coins increased from 5% in control villages to 26% in treated villages. The study is rated medium confidence due to its partial description of the evaluation questions.

Confidence Assessment

Overall low: The cell is rated low due to a limited number of studies.

Other outcomes in this study:

None.