

LAND, TREES, AND WOMEN EVOLUTION OF LAND TENURE INSTITUTIONS IN WESTERN GHANA AND SUMATRA

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Widespread deforestation in many developing countries has contributed to ecological deterioration, particularly in marginal areas. Agroforestry has the potential to halt this decline and improve the livelihoods of poor inhabitants of these areas. Yet agroforestry depends on people's rights to plant and use trees, rights established by prevailing systems of land and tree tenure. Without clear property rights, there are few incentives to preserve natural resources and to invest in trees because future benefits would not accrue to those who manage them. Understanding land tenure institutions and their effect upon agroforestry practices is therefore critical in improving natural resource management and reducing poverty.

Land, Trees, and Women examines the evolution of customary land tenure institutions in areas of Western Ghana and Western Sumatra where traditional matrilineal inheritance systems have been changing. Though the cultural, natural, and policy environments of the two regions differ, most of the study sites are within agriculturally marginal, less favored areas, with a high incidence of poverty. Communities with contrasting land tenure institutions, farming systems, and natural resources were included in the study.

The study has three objectives: (1) to quantify the effects of various land tenure institutions on the efficiency of agroforestry and cropland management and on investments; (2) to identify factors affecting the evolution of customary land tenure institutions; and (3) to assess the implications of land tenure institutions for gender equity and preservation of the natural resource base. Several different, but complementary,

methodologies were employed to analyze evolutionary change from the community or village level down to the level of the individual and the plot. Three sets of analyses were used. The first was an extensive study of communities located over wide areas, with a range of natural, socioeconomic, and policy environments. The second was an intensive study of households in selected communities, where differing land tenure institutions and farming systems coexist. The third was a study of intrahousehold and gender issues, based on a detailed retrospective survey of land inheritance and educational investment in individuals within households.

The study found that the major factor accounting for the decrease in forestland is population pressure. Under the communal tenure system, population pressure has led to the privatization of land rights, the clearing of forest areas, and the erosion of traditional land acquisition methods. Since the effort of clearing forests is rewarded by strong individual land rights, reversing the trend of deforestation will not be simple. Also, there is no strong statistical evidence to support popular arguments that customary land tenure in Ghana and Sumatra discourages commercial agroforestry. Indeed, commercial trees have been planted under communal ownership systems as widely and actively as under private ownership systems. Even where land rights are relatively weak, the expectation of strengthened individual land rights stimulates tree planting. However, once trees are planted, the communal land ownership system is converted de facto to private ownership. Agroforestry systems, whether on privately

or communally owned land, have a positive indirect effect on equity because agroforestry is more profitable than food crops in marginal areas where poverty levels are high. To improve the efficiency of natural resource management, promote gender equity, and disseminate best agroforestry practices, public policies should harness the profit incentives that underly institutional change in land ownership systems. Three issues must be addressed; they are described below.

PROPERTY RIGHTS INSTITUTIONS AND POLICIES

Property rights institutions are moving toward providing proper incentives for efficient natural resource management. Though improved management will take place when there is a closer match between those who control and those who use resources, direct intervention in gender-based property rights policy has proven to be extremely difficult. Any program or legal framework that assigns rights to resources must be evaluated for barriers to women's participation. In addition, the twin forces of commercialization and individualization of land rights should lead to a more widespread demand for titling over time by smallholder farmers. Thus, land-titling programs will be feasible once communal land tenure institutions become sufficiently individualized. Yet such programs are costly and there is always the danger that the rich and the political elite will seize large areas of titled land. Efforts to strengthen women's land rights through legal reform must go hand in hand with women's education, which will enable them to claim their rights.

DEVELOPMENT AND DISSEMINATION OF AGROFORESTRY TECHNOLOGIES

Since there are strong incentives to manage agroforestry plots on sloping lands under communal ownership, improving profitability of agroforestry systems, whether through dissemination of improved germplasm or better cultivation practices, is needed. In developing technology transfer programs, care must be taken to include women farmers, who have traditionally been neglected by male-dominated extension systems, and who may prefer to plant different tree species than men.

MARKET DEVELOPMENT AND OTHER POLICY ISSUES

Market development is critical in generating the degree of intensification required to enable rural people to lift themselves from poverty without undermining their resources. Increased rural road construction is key to such development. While the expansion of roads may hasten deforestation by enhancing the profitability of timber harvesting, it will also accelerate the development of agroforestry, where primary forests have already been cleared.

The establishment of equitable, profitable, and sustainable agroforestry systems can contribute significantly to the reduction of poverty in marginal areas, help prevent soil erosion, and create tree biomass. Moreover, profitable agroforestry can help strengthen individual land rights. Thus, the development of agroforestry is conducive to both efficiency and equity from both private and social viewpoints.

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