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Environmental and gender impacts of land tenure regularization in Africa: Pilot evidence from Rwanda[☆]

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ABSTRACT

We evaluate the short-term impact of a pilot land regularization program in Rwanda using a geographic discontinuity design with spatial fixed effects. Three key findings emerge from the analysis. First, the program seems to have improved land access for legally married women (about 76% of married couples) and prompted better recording of inheritance rights without gender bias. Second, we find that the program was associated with a very large impact on investment and maintenance of soil conservation measures. This effect was particularly pronounced for female headed households, suggesting that this group had suffered from high levels of tenure insecurity which the program managed to reduce. Third, land market activity declined, allowing us to reject the hypothesis that the program caused a wave of distress sales or widespread landlessness by vulnerable people. Implications for program design and policy are discussed.

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1. Introduction

While Africa has been historically rather land abundant, three factors have focused attention on land rights and the way in which they are managed. First, a combination of population growth, soil degradation, urban expansion, exacerbated more recently by a ‘rush’ for land to benefit from rising global demand for agricultural commodities and environmental services, increased pressures on land. Second, even land currently cultivated is characterized by enormous productivity gaps; recent studies show that no African country except South Africa achieves even 25% of the potential (Deininger et al., 2011). The investments needed to bridge this gap are unlikely to be forthcoming without secure rights. Third, structural transformation from an agrarian to a manufacturing- and service-based economy will require shifts of population and transfers of land to other producers for which markets are

likely to be the most efficient mechanism. While land registration can, in principle, contribute to these objectives, limited success and sustainability of such programs in the past led many observers to believe that interventions of this nature have limited benefits and will be too complex and risky to undertake.

With land widely considered to having been a significant contributor to the 1994 Genocide, Rwanda’s government has emphasized the importance of clarifying land rights to avoid conflict and promote structural transformation. This has led to far-reaching legal measures to address a history of often land-related conflict and tribal division, end gender discrimination in land access, and provide a framework to make optimum use of available land resources to contribute to social and economic development. The country also launched a program of land tenure regularization (LTR) that is one of the most low-cost and ambitious (in scope) interventions of this nature. Assessing the impact of this program is of interest in three respects. First, with increasing demand for land, many African countries are looking for low-cost options to clarify land tenure, a topic that has been discussed in the literature largely from other regions (Deininger and Feder, 2009). Second, how land issues are resolved will affect social norms in other areas such as gender equality and resource access, so that evaluating the impact of interventions in this area can provide broader insights (Aldashev et al., 2012). Third, in terms of assessing the more narrow returns to the land title registration process, it is of interest to see if land title registration leads to changes in investment and related markets such as the use of credit.

In this paper, we assess the impact of the (rural) pilots that preceded the national roll-out of Rwanda’s LTR program. Outcome variables considered are the incidence of land-related investment, female land ownership and inheritance, the frequency of land transactions, and credit access. We find that pilot participants doubled their investment

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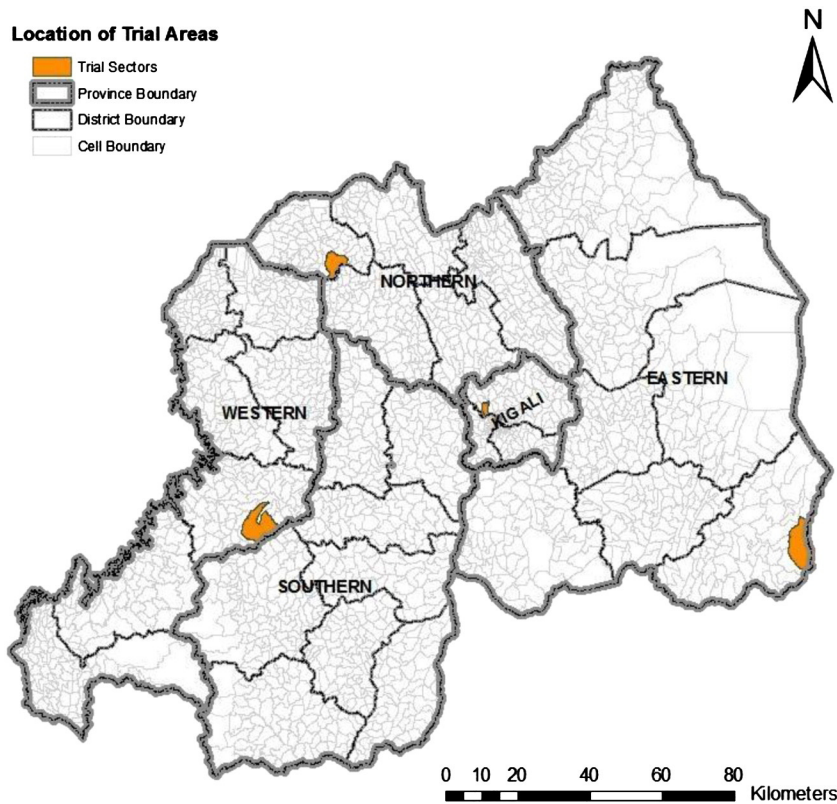


Fig. 1. Location of trial areas.

As cells would be too small to identify on the map, we marked sectors, noting that in the case of the Eastern Region, the trial cell is located in the country's interior so that we have treatment and control households along the entire cell boundary.

in soil conservation, with a larger increase for females. Formalization appears to have increased tenure security by legally married women – though not for women who are not formally married – and clarified future inheritance. One notable exception is that of female headed households who preferred to follow tradition in explicit contravention of the law. We find no evidence of LTR-induced credit-effects, consistent with the fact that the pilot had not yet led to the establishment of a functioning registry. There was also no indication of increased land market activity, making it unlikely that the program contributed to distress sales or increased landlessness.

These findings have implications for programs in this area. Benefits from land regularization are most likely in terms of female empowerment and investment, especially if tenure insecurity had been high before the program and the underlying legal framework makes provisions for women's equality in land ownership. Impacts on the operation of land markets and credit access will take longer to materialize or be contingent on complementary measures such as registries. In the case of Rwanda, ensuring full realization and sustainability of potential benefits from land tenure regularization emerging from our analysis in a nation-wide roll-out will require addressing areas where policy is unclear, ambiguous, or at variance with practice on the ground. The paper is organized as follows. Section two places the topic in context and identifies areas that warrant

greater empirical attention by reviewing lessons from the literature on land titling in Africa. Section three describes the challenges confronted by Rwanda, the institutional changes made in response to these, and relevant characteristics of the LTR program. The econometric approach and sampling strategy are described in section four, followed by a discussion of key results with respect to investment, women's land rights, inheritance, and land market participation in section five. We conclude with the implications for policy and follow-up research in section six.

2. Background and conceptual framework

While issues of land tenure formalization in Africa have long been the subject of debate, increased land scarcity and recent growth in demand for land reinforce the importance of securing rights to allow land-related investment that would close the productivity gap while at the same time ensuring that increased land values benefit local land users rather than raising the specter of dispossession. A review of the pros and cons of land titling interventions drawing on the conceptual and empirical literature sets out the challenges which any program of land tenure regularization will have to confront.

2.1. Conceptual framework

Establishment and maintenance of a property rights system is a public good that affects outcomes through two main channels (Besley and Ghatak, 2010). One is to lower the risk of land loss which would increase investment incentives and reduce the need to spend resources on protecting property. The second is the facilitation of market transactions that allow efficiency-enhancing transfers of land to productive users and its use as collateral in financial markets. In addition, the way in which land ownership is assigned

Table 1
Distribution of sampled households by program participation.

Province	District	Sector	Pop. density Pers./km ²	Number of sampled households	
				Treatment	Control (adjacent cells)
West	Karongi	Ruganda	337	125	245
North	Musanze	Rwaza	769	465	694
Kigali City	Gasabo	Gatsata	3591	462	502
East	Kirehe	Mubama	274	404	657
Total number of households				1456	2098

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