



# Investigating the impacts of increased rural land tenure security: A systematic review of the evidence

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## ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the multiple effects of increased land tenure security on rural people through a systematic review of the available evidence. The research involves collecting and synthesising the robust quantitative and qualitative research around this topic and is guided by a theory of change that reflects expected effects from the main land tenure security-related activities. Based on the analysis of 59 robust studies, the paper finds strong evidence for positive effects of land tenure security on productive and environmentally-beneficial agricultural investments as well as on female empowerment, but a lack of support for links with productivity, access to credit, and income. Key contextual factors that shape the validity of expected causal chains are also identified and relate to the potential for discrimination and elite capture, which can affect intervention implementation and enforcement; historical experiences with land ownership, which can shape perceptions of current land tenure security, regardless of the actual level; and the characteristics of local lending institutions, which can influence intended effects on credit access. The paper also finds that more research is needed to capture long-term effects of land formalisation interventions and to shed further light on potential environmental benefits.

## 1. Introduction

Secure and equal access to land is considered key to reducing rural poverty and stimulating rural development. Its role as a poverty reduction instrument is highlighted by its inclusion in the Sustainable Development Agenda as a prominent means of achieving SDG2: “end hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture”. In terms of wider rural development, secured land access is considered an integral part of achieving inclusive rural transformation, helping to foster the increased agricultural productivity, diversification, commercialisation and environmental-sustainability that is needed for rural households to adapt and thrive as they are faced with growing challenges to their livelihoods (IFAD, 2016). Accordingly, activities that aim to improve security and equality of land access are the subject of increasing investment from multilateral and bilateral donors (See World Bank, 2016; USAID, 2016a), and its effects have become the focus of increasing scholarly attention (See Holden and Ghebru, 2016; Lawry et al., 2017).

Increasing the land tenure security (LTS) of rural households is suggested to have a variety of economic, social and environmental benefits. Economically, tenure secure farmers are expected to be incentivised to invest more in their agricultural activities, safe in the knowledge that they will reap sufficient returns (Meinzen-Dick, 2009),

and have greater capacity to invest through loosened capital constraint, with secured land being used as collateral for obtaining formal credit (De Soto, 2000). Secured tenure is also expected to incentivise the rental and sale of under-used land, thus increasing allocative efficiency, and reducing economic and social inequality by widening land access opportunities (Deininger and Binswanger, 1999; Sadoulet et al., 2001). Additional social benefits are expected in the form of reduced contestation and conflict over land, the risk of which is expected to become more prominent as a result of climate change (Nuesiri, 2014); and increased female empowerment, through improving women's tenure security over land (USAID, 2016b). That increased investment is also expected to take the form of long-term soil conservation measures is the primary suggested environmental benefit (FAO, 2002; Quan and Dyer, 2008).

Despite the widespread promotion of LTS by governments and donor agencies, there remains a purported lack of understanding of the expected benefits, and the contextual factors which may shape these benefits, demonstrated by practitioners (See Dubois, 1997; Van der Molen, 2002; Deininger, 2003; Everest-Phillips, 2008; Gignoux et al., 2013). To address this issue, this paper presents the results of a systematic review of the robust evidence of LTS effectiveness, in a bid to strengthen understanding in this area.

Systematic reviews involve exhaustively collecting the dispersed

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evidence on a specific topic using detailed criteria that includes a threshold for methodological rigour. The identified evidence is then synthesised and analysed in order to identify themes and research gaps, and to draw generalizable insights. Due to its rigour and neutrality, systematic reviews are viewed as the gold standard evidence review methodology (Bryman, 2008). This review builds upon previous syntheses of the LTS evidence base, including a 2012 systematic review of evidence on individual tenure rights recognition interventions (See Lawry et al., 2017) and a 2016 literature review of the effect of LTS of food security (See Holden and Ghebru, 2016), assessing a wider range of LTS-related activities and outcomes, and taking advantage of the new studies that are regularly being produced.

This work therefore represents the first systematic review that considers evidence on all of the main channels for increasing LTS, with the main LTS-related activities being identified using the project portfolio of a major LTS donor, a further distinctive aspect of this research. The donor in question is the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), which funded a total of 122 LTS-related projects between 2010 and 2015 and constitutes a prominent member of a number of key global institutions such as the International Land Coalition (ILC). This set of activities was then used to develop a detailed theory of change around which to base the search and synthesis parts of the review. With the activities being broadly representative of the common LTS activities implemented by other organisations and governments, this research will provide in-depth insights into the dynamics of LTS effects which can be used for future intervention design across the development community. In addition, it provides guiding insights for future research by identifying research gaps and interesting areas for future investigation. Finally, it represents a potential best-practice example of how a development organisation should thoroughly review the effectiveness of activities contained within its portfolio, in order to identify possible improvements and to guide future investment.

With the LTS theory of change established, the approach of the review is to use the available evidence to assess the validity of the specific expected causal linkages within the theory of change, and to identify possible contextual factors which may mitigate effects of increased LTS across geographic, economic and social dimensions. In addition, research gaps are identified by a mapping of the evidence base using the identified studies. In sum, the following research questions are addressed:

- What is the evidence for causal links between LTS activities and commonly expected outcomes and impacts?
- What are the most important contextual factors that shape the extent to which the causal links are realised?
- Upon which linkages in the LTS theory of change is further robust research required?

The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 provides the background to the use of LTS as a rural development instrument, followed by a presentation and discussion of the theory of change used to guide the systematic review in Section 3. The methodology employed by the review is presented in Section 4 and is followed by an overview of the search results in Section 5. Section 6 presents and discusses the findings of the identified studies and their implications for the review's research questions, followed by the conclusion in Section 7.

## 2. Land tenure security and rural development

Land tenure refers to the formal or informal agreement that governs the use, mortgage and transfer of land (FAO, 2002; Holden et al., 2013). The degree of security of land tenure can be seen as the degree of “certainty that a person's rights to land will be recognised by others and protected in cases of specific challenges” (FAO, 2002: P. 18). Therefore, a household has low tenure security if they do not have a means of proving their right to land; if they have proof but it is not institutionally

enforced; or if confusion and contestation exists over the proof, as in the case of overlapping parcel registration (Broegaard, 2009; Mutangadura, 2007). With this in mind, an LTS intervention can be seen as any efforts taken to increase this actual level of security and/or the perception of it, with the review considering this to relate to agricultural and forest land and fisheries, based on the main activities of the development community.

Property rights to productive resources, and their effective institutional enforcement, have long been posited as a key condition for economic growth, dating back to the work of Smith (1776), Marshall (1890), and Swynnerton (1954). More recently, property rights have come to the fore thanks to key literature that has refreshed the property rights argument (See North, 1990; De Soto, 2000; Sokoloff and Engerman, 2000; Acemoglu et al., 2001), combined with facilitating conditions within the global economy. These conditions are suggested to include the rising competition for productive resources, especially land, caused by climate change-induced land degradation, population density growth, and population movement caused by conflict and market opportunities (Conning and Deb, 2007; Nuesiri, 2014); and a perception that weak property rights systems led to disappointing outcomes of the market liberalisation push of the 1980s and 90s (Rodrik, 2015). In the rural development arena, property rights advocacy naturally focused on secure access to the primary productive resource of the rural poor: land (FAO, 2002).

The groundswell of support for the poverty-reducing power of strengthened rural LTS has resulted in the implementation of a variety of interventions. These include land ownership formalisation activities covering the mapping and formal registration of already-owned land; plus the redistribution of registered land and the strengthening of institutions that deal with land allocation and ownership enforcement (Dekker, 2005; Udry et al., 2011). In addition, attempts have been made to improve gender equity by improving women's tenure security over land, including through inclusion with their spouse on land ownership certificates (Grown et al., 2005).

LTS activities are predominantly delivered through national land reform programmes. Such programmes have been implemented by developing countries across Asia, Latin American and Sub-Saharan Africa, with over thirty countries in Sub-Saharan Africa alone having implemented some form of land reform since the early 1990s (Alden Wily, 2003). In addition to the above activities, these reforms also often involve the devolution of land-related administrative responsibility to local institutions and the removal of other administrative barriers to obtaining secured land access rights (De Villiers, 2003).

Despite the support and growing investment, there remains a perceived lack of appreciation of the complexities of how LTS is generated and sustained. Specifically, interventions that involve land ownership formalisation are suggested to often ignore the existing customary land administration systems that are in place, that have been developed over long periods and that are deeply embedded in the history and culture of the area (Dubois, 1997). Additionally, LTS interventions are purported to commonly assume land administration to be static, ignoring dynamic influences such as evolving means of land transfer, and changes to land use planning at the local and national levels (Van der Molen, 2002). Accordingly, the following represents a common view of the level of understanding that exists in the LTS arena:

*“The generalisation that secure property rights are essential for investment and growth ignores the disturbing fact that the manner in which recognition of asset possession or ownership is created, transferred, altered, challenged and gradually consolidated is poorly understood”* (Everest-Phillips, 2008, p.1, p.1)

## 3. Land tenure security: theory of change

To effectively investigate the effectiveness of increased LTS, a strong understanding must be developed of how it is expected to achieve its

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