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LAND AND GOVERNANCE IN RURAL LIBERIA: RESULTS FROM THE COMMUNITY LAND PROTECTION PROGRAM



HOUSEHOLD HEAD IS INTERVIEWED
PHOTO: BEN EWING / THE CLOUDBURST GROUP
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INTRODUCTION

Communally managed land and natural resources are essential inputs for social, political and economic sustainability in agrarian societies. Increased land demand and fast evolving norms of land administration pose an important question: how can communities protect and benefit from communal land in the face of changing laws and markets? We study one option, the Community Land Protection Program (CLPP), in Liberia, to better understand whether initial external support of community management structures can empower communities to govern their most important natural resource autonomously and progressively.

Previous research has focused on the economic effects of individual land titling programs and the positive returns that these programs have for household-level economic development (Galiani et al. 2010; Lawry et al. 2014). Research on the effects of supporting communities to protect their community land, rather than private land, remains limited (Lawry et al. 2014), although there are some case studies on efforts to improve community governance (Knight et al. 2012). This evaluation fills this knowledge gap on the benefits of community land protection by rigorously investigating the effects of the CLPP model on improving tenure security, local empowerment, resource governance and livelihoods.

The Community Land Protection Program's evaluation also addresses the broader question of the effectiveness of skills building, training and technical support interventions by outside actors. While the Community Land Protection Program aims to provide comprehensive support to communities so that they might protect their land, it does not provide specific material benefits in the form of cash loans or grants. As a result, this evaluation presents an additional test of the general hypothesis that skills-based interventions where leaders aim to shift norms, as opposed to change incentives, can spur economic development.

This policy brief outlines main findings from a rigorous USAID-funded rigorous evaluation of the Community Land Protection Program in Liberia. The study evaluated whether a Land Tenure



Female enumerator conducts a focus group discussion in Lofa County, Liberia.

intervention that promotes communal governance of natural resources, demarcates land boundaries and provides mapping and titling support would address the critical need of protecting communal land and improving local resource governance for the overall benefit of citizens. The brief first highlights key points, then provides background on land tenure in Liberia, the intervention and the evaluation. It provides in-depth result on governance and land tenure before concluding.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Even at a comparatively early stage, the Community Land Protection Program has had a striking effect on how community members perceive their leaders in treatment communities. This result provides important evidence to support the premise of the CLPP intervention that land governance programs are most successful when they involve long-term and on-going support, training and capacity building for communities. The midline results of this evaluation point to the effectiveness of this embedded approach.

- The qualitative data demonstrate widespread community satisfaction with the Community Land Protection Program’s boundary harmonization process, including boundary negotiations with neighboring communities, identifying boundary landmarks and planting boundary trees. Scaling up these program components across Liberia would be likely be beneficial.
- Respondents overall increased their participation in land governance activities. Poor respondents, youth and members of minority groups improved participation on some measures but not all. It makes sense that the least connected community members in a program show the most minimal change, at least in the short run. A longer-term analysis would enable us to more deeply understand results and to investigate whether change is more positive over time.
- Longer term data collection on several indicators would enable us to see how trends continue to develop across treatment and control communities. These currently inconclusive indicators include key indicators of tenure security, which at present show minimal changes. Only after the intervention finishes will we be able to fully understand its effects.

BACKGROUND CONTEXT ON LIBERIA

Conflict over land and natural resource rights contributed to the violence of Liberia’s 14-year civil war, which ended in 2003. The government considered almost all land public and the president had the authority to sell public land to well-connected elites and as private concessions (USAID 2010). Land became a tool for patronage and an opportunity for rent-seeking and elite capture, weakening community control of vital natural resources. Liberia’s post-war democratically-elected government has made several key reforms to the country’s land tenure system that aim to address several resulting inequalities and grievances. These include the development of a comprehensive new national Land Rights Policy, which was adopted by the government in 2013. Most recently, a draft Land Rights Act has been developed but not yet passed.

THE COMMUNITY LAND PROTECTION PROGRAM (CLPP)

The Community Land Protection Program in Liberia is part of a global land rights program developed by the organization Namati that protects community-based land rights rather than individual titles and works to empower the impoverished and minorities as well. The Sustainable Development Institute (SDI) delivered the intervention at the community level over the course of 12–18 months from 2016–2017 (see Figure 1). The United Kingdom’s Department for International Development funded the program, while USAID, the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) and Namati funded the intervention. The implementer scheduled program implementation to begin in 2014, but had barely started before pausing in July 2014 due to the outbreak of the Ebola virus in Liberia, and resumed in the first quarter of 2016. Because of this and other unforeseen difficulties, the implementation reached fewer towns than planned.¹

¹ This means not all results necessarily have a large enough sample size to ensure that they are not due to chance, although the primary results considered in this brief are likely acceptable. See the CLPP Midline Report for more details (USAID, 2018).

The Community Land Protection Program in Liberia consisted of three components:

1. Community empowerment, including provision of legal education regarding rights and responsibilities in the context of decentralized land management;
2. Boundary harmonization and conflict resolution, including comprehensive mapping of community land, negotiation with neighbors and boundary demarcation;
3. Fostering good governance, including discussing and adopting rules for community land and natural resource management and electing a diverse, permanent and accountable governing body to manage community lands and natural resources with an emphasis on strengthening the rights of marginalized groups and women to participate.

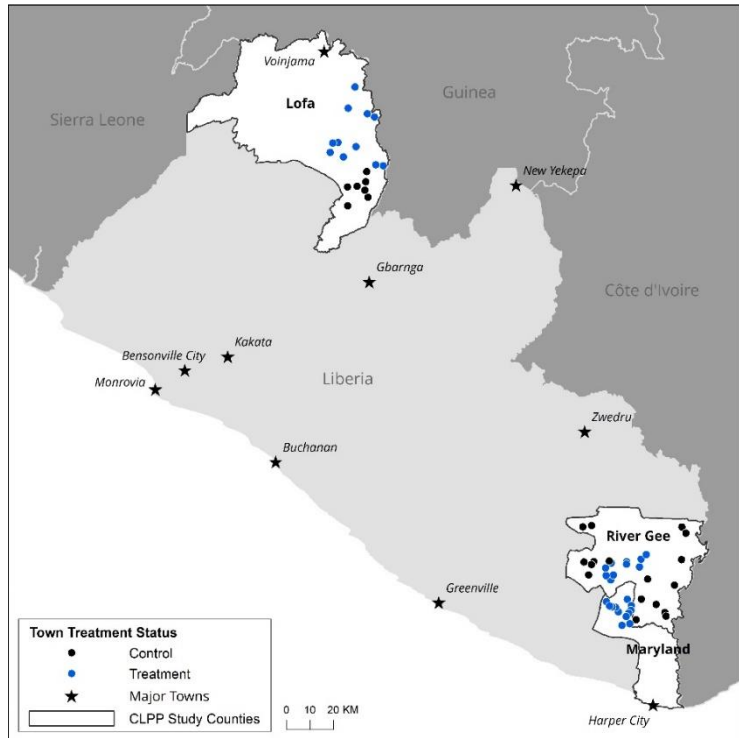


Figure 1. Map of CLPP Areas

The Community Land Protection Program focused on community land rights with an education component to align community practices with the draft Land Rights Act. As the Act remains under review and a formal process for legal certification does not currently exist, CLPP’s documentation procedures for customary land have remained informal in Liberia.

SDI delivered the intervention in the rural Lofa, Maryland and River Gee counties. The evaluation’s field team collected a panel survey dataset of household heads at the baseline, prior to the program’s start, and at midline, approximately ten months later. This panel included 683 household observations and 36 community observations. At midline, the field team added more observations to obtain 818 household observations and 43 community observations.

Three community leaders completed the leaders’ survey in each town² at baseline and again at midline. These leaders included the Town Chief, as well as the youth, women and a minority leader (if applicable) for a community. Each community leader, or Town Chief, was automatically eligible for the community leader interview. In addition to the Town Chief, the field team requested the most senior female leader and the minority leader for interviews.

² A key factor in both the program design and the evaluation is working with the correct community land governance unit. The term “town” is synonymous with “village” in Liberian English. In some cases, a single town has historically managed and used communal land and natural resources on its own. In other cases, several towns in a cluster share that responsibility, according to mapping exercises with community leaders. Land governance units generally correspond to the governance unit of a clan. The evaluation considered results from an average of the towns in a town cluster.

The field team conducted three focus group discussions (FGDs) in each of the towns where data was collected at midline. Key sub-groups of interest for the FGDs included women, youth (men and women), members of minority groups (men and women), hunters (men) and elders (men and women). Every town had female and youth discussion groups. Each town added a third discussion group based on the presence of sufficient members of either minority groups or hunters at baseline.

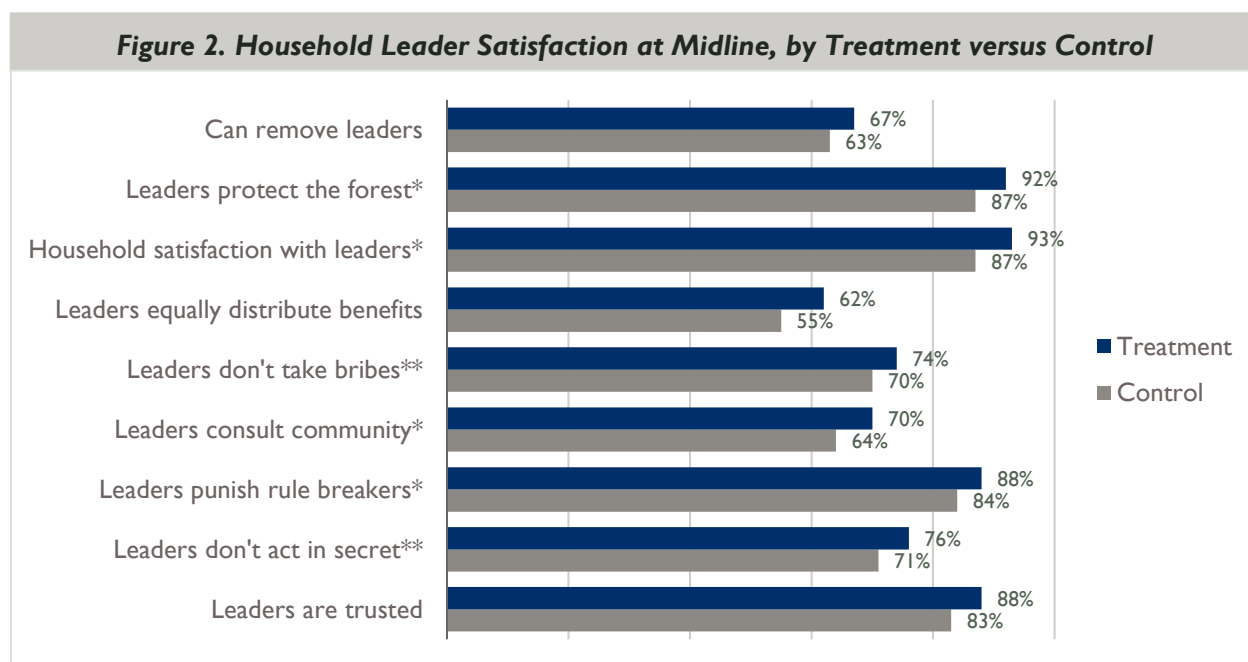
At midline in 2017, the average age of respondents was just under 47 years, and this was consistent across the treatment and control groups. Similarly, the proportion of youth respondents did not vary substantially between treatment groups (39% in treatment areas and 36% in control areas). One-third of household survey respondents were women, mostly female heads of household. In rare cases the field team interviewed other females, mostly wives, when the male head of household was unavailable. In 71% of households, the respondent had no formal schooling. Thirty-one percent of respondents were a member of a minority ethnic group or religion. Minority respondents were more common in control areas, where 39% of household survey respondents were members of a minority group, as opposed to treatment areas, where 26% of respondents were members of a minority group. They were similar in terms of socioeconomic status, as measured by an index of household assets and lands.

Households rarely held any type of documentation for household townland or farmland. Eight percent of households had documentation for their land, and of them, 69% reported having a tribal certificate. The remaining 25 households had a Land Deed (23%), a Mother Deed (11%) or a Note of Sale (5%).

THE FINDINGS

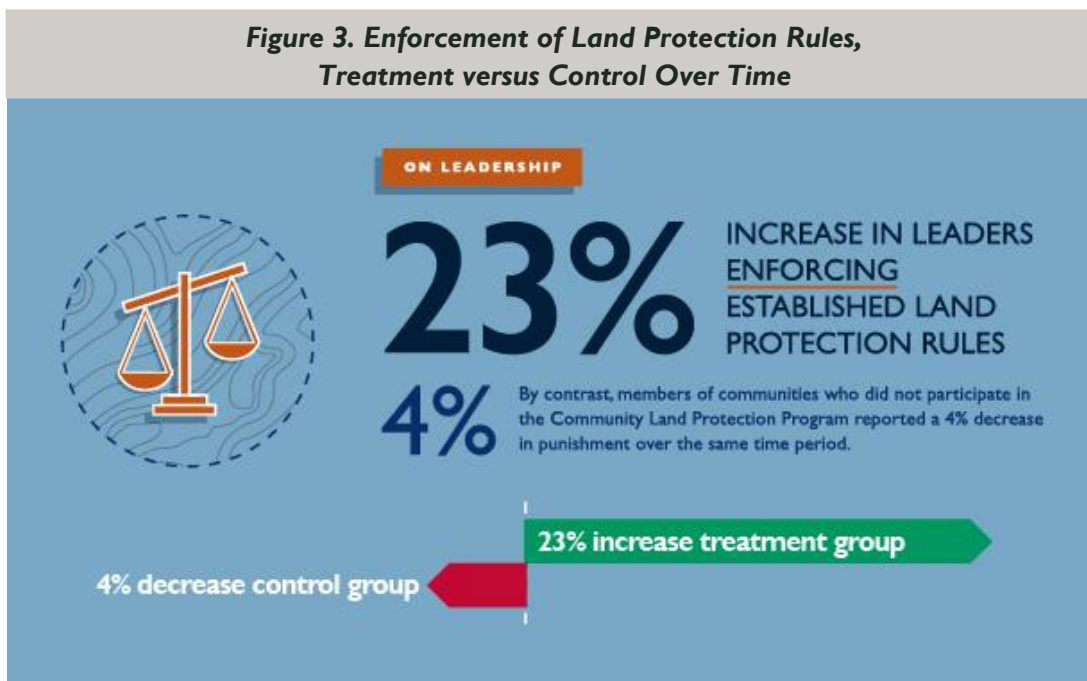
COMMUNITY GOVERNANCE AND LAND RULES

There is compelling evidence that participation in the CLPP statistically significantly increased trust, satisfaction, accountability, capacity and transparency in local land governance. See Figure 2 for details.



* $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$. Smaller significance levels (p -values) indicate that results are not likely to have happened just by chance. For more details on statistical models, see the CLPP Midline Report (2017).

Respondents were also statistically significantly more satisfied with land rules and more likely to believe that leaders punished rule-breakers (Figure 3). The percentage of households reporting that their leaders punish people who break land rules rose 23 percentage points (from 67% to 90%) among households in treatment communities from baseline to midline while it declined slightly (from 88% to 84%) in control communities during that time.³



FGDs in treatment towns expressed positive and recent changes in local land governance. They were more likely to mention that they now had stricter rules and processes in place over granting outsiders access to their land. Control group discussions in contrast did not mention this key outcome. A group of youth in one treatment town in Maryland explained new rules and regulations surrounding forest access in their town:

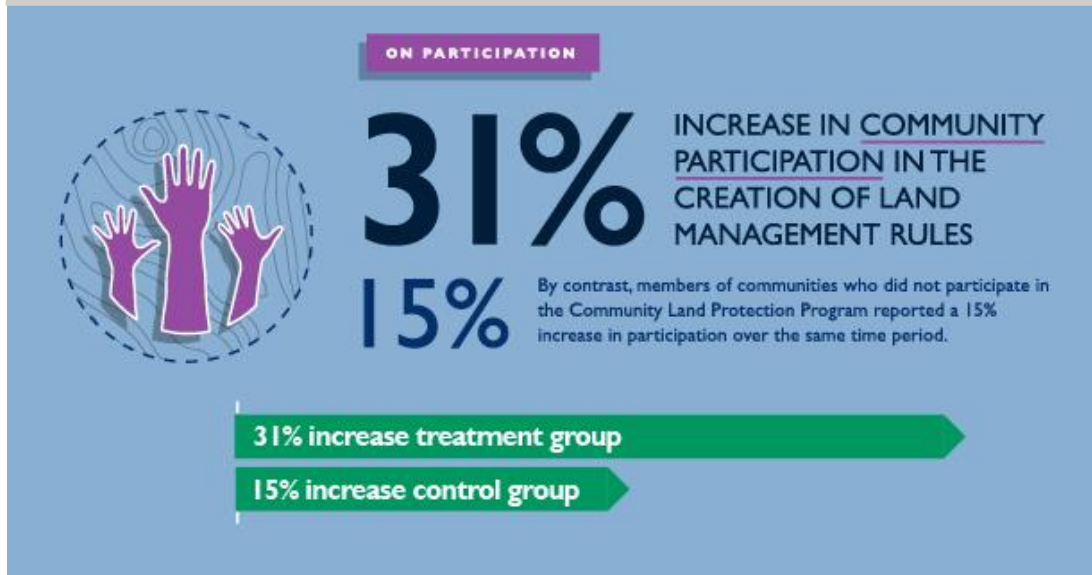
“There are changes... in the days of old our forefathers never had these rules and regulations in place, so anybody just used to come from anywhere, enter any other forest, and just start hunting at any time, without even asking [about] the views of anybody [else]. But since those rules have been put into place and we are implementing them, nobody just comes in from anywhere now and just starts going into the forest.”

In accordance with the program’s focus on participation in land management meetings, households in treatment communities were statistically significantly more likely to be involved in developing land rules.⁴ Household participation in creating land rules rose across the study area between baseline and midline by 31 percentage points (from 32% to 63%) for treatment households and 15 percentage points (from 38% to 53%) for control households. See Figure 4.

³ The difference between the treatment and control groups over time has a confidence level of $p < 0.10$.

⁴ The difference between the treatment and control groups over time has a confidence level of $p < 0.05$.

Figure 4. Participation in Land Management, Treatment versus Control Over Time



However, other responses related to land rules were more mixed, such as a slight decrease in rule enforcement. The reason for these observed decreases in community participation in rule monitoring and enforcement could be that leaders were completing these tasks themselves more effectively, people were following the rules more (necessitating less enforcement) or that the program emboldened community members to oppose laws they consider negative. Endline data analysis and collection will provide further insights to explain these results.

The Community Land Protection Program led to some statistically significant benefits in terms of participation and governance for vulnerable groups as well. Minorities in treatment communities were significantly more likely to report that they help to resolve conflicts, increasing from 34% at baseline to 48% at midline, as compared to the control respondents, who stayed constant at 31% at baseline and 30% at midline.⁵ Youth were also more likely to help monitor rule-breaking.⁶ Poor respondents in treatment communities were significantly more likely to report that they help create land rules, increasing from 40% to 67% over time while control respondents decreased from 38% to 24%.⁷ However, some of the meeting participation and attendance trends for minorities, youth and the poor were mixed.

TENURE SECURITY

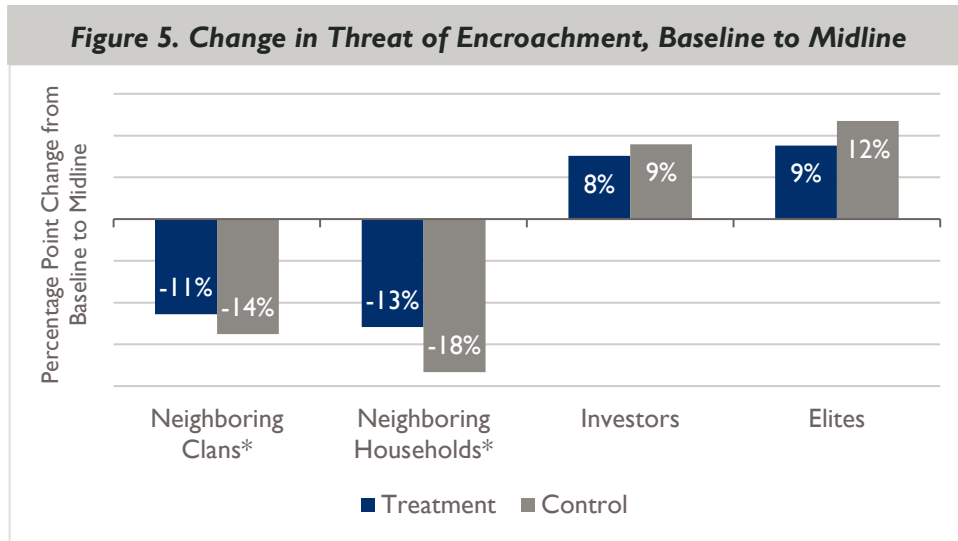
The tenure security measure used the perceived likelihood of encroachment on community land disaggregated by actor: neighboring households, neighboring clans, elites, investors and government officials. The perceived risk of encroachment on land by neighboring clans and households sharply decreased over time. However, it decreased more in the control group than the treatment group. It might be that the perceived risk of encroachment by clans and households did not fall more in the treatment group because the program revived discussions of dormant land disputes. If so, we would expect to see

⁵ The difference between the treatment and control groups over time has a confidence level of $p < 0.05$.

⁶ The difference between the treatment and control groups over time has a confidence level of $p < 0.01$.

⁷ The difference between the treatment and control groups over time has a confidence level of $p < 0.05$.

improvements in perceived tenure security in treatment groups once the boundary harmonization process is complete. In the treatment group, belief that neighboring clans would encroach on land dropped eleven percentage points (from 22% to 11%) while in the control group it dropped fourteen percentage points (from 29% to 15%). Belief that neighboring households would encroach dropped 13 percentage points in the treatment (from 28% to 15%) and 14 percentage points in the control (from 36% to 18%). The perceived likelihood of encroachment by elites and investors rose in treatment and control communities over time; however, these results were not statistical significant. Figure 5 depicts the change in perceived threat of encroachment by source, as reported by treatment and control households over time.



* $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$. Smaller significance levels (p-values) indicate that results are not likely to have happened by chance.

Leaders in addition to household respondents reported a lower risk of encroachment. Much of this trend is observable in both treatment and control communities—as reported risk of encroachment declined in both—but notably, reported risk of encroachment by elites declined more among leaders in treatment communities than among leaders in control communities (from 27% falling above the mean to 18%, versus 28% falling above the mean to 24%). This trend likely indicates greater levels of trust in leaders (part of the elite), as accords with the household-level increase in satisfaction with local leaders. An endline analysis could provide more knowledge on the meaning of this finding.

Minorities and youth in in Community Land Protection Program treatment communities report few incidents of loss of access or reallocation of communal land. Moreover, poor respondents in CLPP treatment communities are significantly less likely to report reallocation of their use of, and access to, communal townland; at midline 15% of poor households in control communities report lost access to communal townland versus none in poor households in treatment communities.⁸

⁸ The land categories used in the evaluation (communal townland, individual townland, forest land, communal farmland and individual farmland) are intended to reflect a continuum of rights from mostly or wholly private to used and managed more collectively. The term 'communal farmland' seeks to describe land used for cultivation that is understood to be more shared than wholly private. Based on survey data, qualitative data and post-study validation data this includes collective farming projects, areas cultivated to provide food on long walks to individual plots and unregulated farming; The difference between the treatment and control groups over time has a confidence level of $p < 0.01$.

BOUNDARY KNOWLEDGE

The qualitative data provide evidence of widespread community satisfaction with the CLPP boundary harmonization process, including boundary negotiations with neighboring communities, identifying boundary landmarks and planting boundary trees. One youth in a treatment community in Maryland explained how knowledge of community boundaries has been transferred from elders to the whole community:

“I believe all the people around here know their boundary line, so for you to cross your boundary and [encroach on] your friends place it can’t happen now. So, we believe that there will be no forcing of land business [land conflicts] again ... As I said I felt too sure [very secure] because we didn’t used to go to the nearby towns to have boundary understanding like this, although our fathers did used to tell us that this is the boundary. The understanding is coming now, and everybody getting the idea concerning the boundaries, so we started going to the nearby towns to have boundary talks...For them to understand that, yes, truly your fathers told you about that boundary... This water or this particular tree or this particular hill, and it is true that’s the same boundary. Now we see that I have my boundary there, so we are very happy now that everything is understood concerning the boundaries.”

CONCLUSION

Since the late 1960s, several African nations have passed laws that recognize and support the central role of community tenure in rural land administration and management. These include Botswana, Burkina Faso, Ghana, Mali, Mozambique, Namibia, Niger, Senegal, South Africa, Uganda and Tanzania. In some instances, community land rights have received the same standing as state-issued land rights and included the integration of customary rules and dispute resolution bodies into the national formal system (Wily, 2000). This trend is also evident in Liberia, where nascent land reforms provide a potential legal framework for protecting community lands.

Yet the impacts of efforts to support communities to protect their customary land remain largely underexplored through rigorous, quantitative evidence. The rights-based argument for formal recognition of customary tenure – according to which providing tenure security for collective legitimate landholders is an end in itself – is widely accepted. However, there is little evidence for an instrumentalist argument that justifies formal recognition of customary tenure to achieve desired development objectives. This evaluation fills this knowledge gap on the benefits of community land protection by comprehensively investigating the political, social and economic effects of the CLPP model.

The Community Land Protection Program found strong and striking effects related to land governance, despite not providing individual incentives. Across a host of different categories related to trust in local leaders and participation in local governance, the CLPP program dramatically and positively increased people’s attitudes and behaviors. The CLPP’s effect on how community members perceive their leaders provides evidence on the mutability of the perceptions of leaders. The fact that targeted support of leaders in a specific thematic area (communal natural resource management) increases overall perceptions suggests that the relationship between local leaders and community members in Liberia could benefit from programming in other domains. It also provides evidence of the ability to successfully create programmatic change through governance structures rather than through economic incentives provided to participants.

Poor respondents in communities supported by the CLPP also reported higher participation in some land governance activities, such as creating rules, and lower participation on other measures. That results are inconclusive for youth, minorities and poor community members highlights the need for further investigation once the intervention is complete and endline data collection and analysis finished.

Given the context in Liberia of recently resolved violence over land and widespread tenure insecurity, it is heartening that governance outcomes changed for the better—yet it likely will take more time to produce tenure security findings. A longer-term study is vital to fully understanding the consequences of community land protection programs such as the CLPP in Liberia to promote land tenure at the community level.

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