

Individualization of property rights and population pressure, the case of the Democratic Republic of Congo



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The policy issue

Inequality in access to land is often considered symptomatic of larger inequalities of opportunities in rural societies. Yet little is known about land access inequality in frontier settings where property rights have not fully transitioned from open access through communal to individual rights.

This EDI Research Insight reviews the evidence on land access institutions – informal (community), legal and private sector – and how they create different responses to increasing land scarcity and population pressures on local resources.

The research focusses on the Equateur province, where an individual traditionally could acquire property rights by converting primary forest to agriculture. But the historical establishment of plantations and colonial property right assignment processes have reduced the availability of forest resources. In this setting, the authors find that land scarcity increased the decision-making power of older generations who keep the right to allocate land for longer before passing to the next generation. Decision rights are possibly kept away from the current generation to limit inequality within families due to potential abuse of power. It is also found that land allocation mechanisms within communities played an important role in maintaining food security across villages.

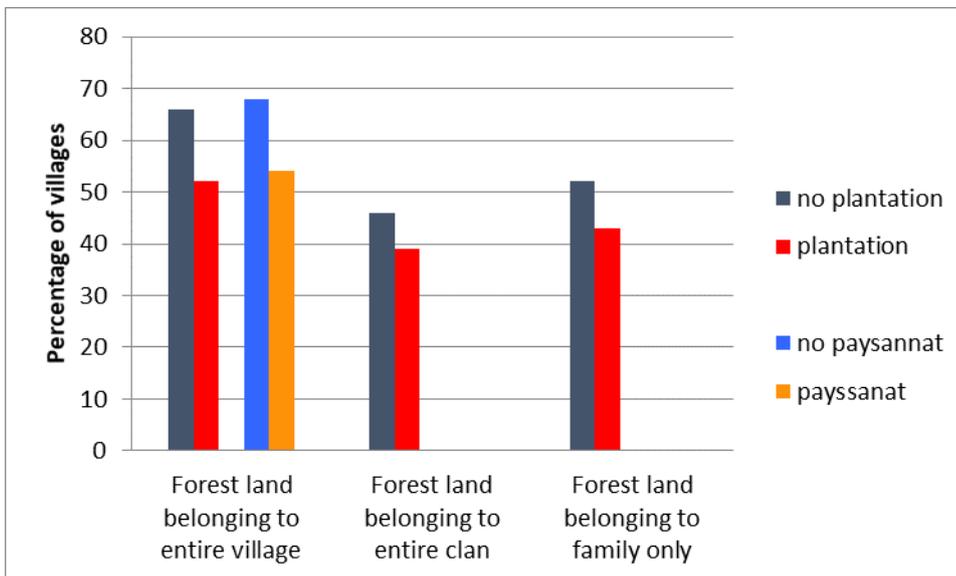
¹ This EDI Research Insight arises from research undertaken for the EDI Case Study “Individualization of property rights and population pressure” [<https://edi.opml.co.uk/research/individualization-property-rights-population-pressure/>]

Motivation

Inequality in access to land is often considered symptomatic of larger inequalities of opportunities in many rural societies, and arguably lies at the heart of persistent inequalities in many countries across the world. Unequal access to land has received much attention in Latin America, South Asia and Southern Africa, where land frontiers are largely closed, and individual user rights are largely established – albeit often uncertain. Much less is known about land access inequality in frontier settings where property rights have not fully transitioned from open access through communal to individual rights. Yet shedding light on the communities’ responses to increasing land scarcity in such settings can be important. This is not only because they affect household access to productive assets, but also because such study can help understand potential root causes of long-standing inequalities. In addition, parts of the world where land rights remain open include the remaining large tropical forest. A better understanding of responses to increased scarcity therefore also matters for climate change mitigation and biodiversity conservation.

Study overview

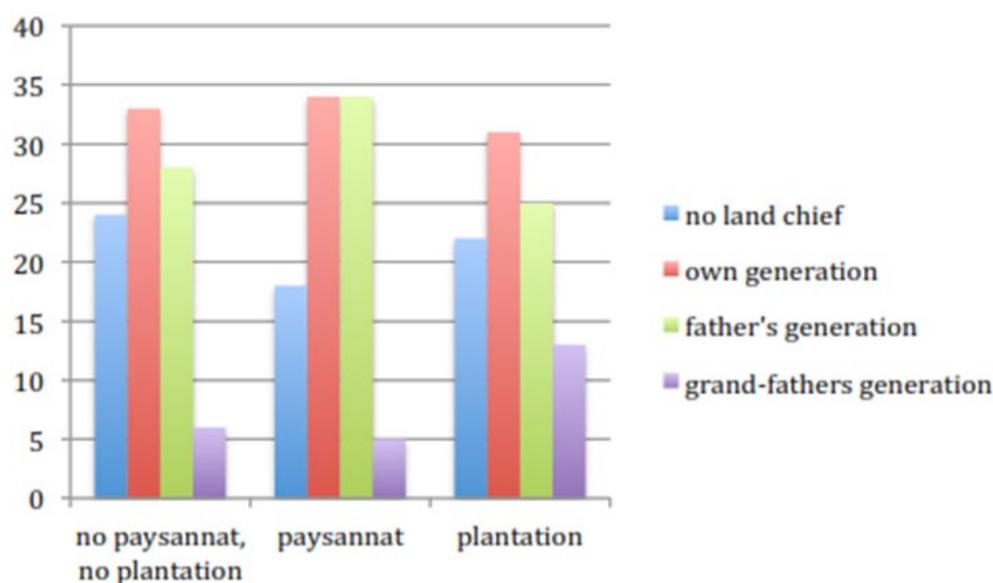
The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) is home to the second largest tropical forest in the world, a large part of which is located in the Equateur province, a remote region with high levels of food insecurity and extreme poverty. Households in Equateur derive most of their resources from small-scale subsistence agriculture through shifting cultivation of staples, completed by the gathering of forest products, fishing and hunting. Land accumulation in this setting is linked to ‘slash and burn agriculture’: one person’s conversion of primary forest to agriculture often leads to that person’s property right over the deforested land. A key question therefore is how social norms related to land conversion may evolve to accommodate greater scarcity.



Note: The graph above only shows significant differences between villages. The presence of plantations in a village is measured separately from the presence of paysannat. Clans refers to subgroups within a village consisting of several families from the same ethnicity

Using data collected in the Equateur province in DRC as well as archival and oral history information on historical events that introduced exogenous changes in pressure on the land and in individualization of the rights, we analyzed the relationship between land scarcity and local institutions governing land access. The chart above shows that the historical establishment of plantations, as well as the exposure to land individualization efforts attempted during the last 20 years of colonial rule (called ‘paysannat’), are associated with a decrease in the availability of the remaining (un-used) forest resources.

Differences in forest resource availability between villages in turn can help explain why decision-making on land conversion differs markedly between villages. Specifically, historical shocks increasing land scarcity (paysannat and plantation) a) raise the probability that older generations keep control over land allocation and b) decrease the prevalence of situations without a clearly designated land chief. Plantations, which are associated with larger land scarcity lead to higher control of grandfather's generation in particular.



Hence, local institutions determining household access to forestland appear to have reacted to changes in forest availability. These results suggest that older generations may be reluctant to give up land rights in situations of scarcity, possibly to facilitate coordination with other families or clans in the village, and avoid land tensions that could arise from too strong sub-divisions in situations of scarcity. The fact that households report more concerns to lose fallows when land decisions are done by current generations provides support for such an interpretation.

Further results show that keeping the land allocation institution “distant” from the current generation limits within family inequality. When the oldest among brothers is himself the land chief, he uses his power to allocate the family land to his own advantage and land scarcity gives them incentives to do so. In an environment where 60% of households declare having missed at least one dinner a week for lack of food, and where land scarcity is increasing with deforestation, implications of such a mechanism are important for within family inequality. In this light, it is intriguing that we don't observe any difference in average food security across villages with more or less land scarcity. This suggests that communities adapt to land scarcity, possibly in part through their land allocation mechanisms.

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