

# Research Statement

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I am an applied microeconomist working at the intersection of development, public, and political economics. Broadly, my research draws upon rich qualitative work to incorporate key nuances about human behavior into sharper predictions from quantitative models for empirical work. To date, much of it has explored customary tenure systems in Sub Saharan Africa, and what happens as they confront state-sanctioned property rights regimes. I apply a variety of experimental and quasi-experimental methods to address causal questions on issues of economic institutions that are extremely important but have historically been difficult to answer. I am skilled at understanding the social contexts in which people live from my own and others' qualitative work, and articulating questions that emerge out of that context. For example, many customary tenure systems distribute land rights amongst multiple people. When confronted with a state that does not recognize these arrangements, strategic incentives may emerge that create insecurity and political consequences. Qualitative understandings help us grapple with significant issues in the lives of the poor, such as their existing assets like land. Doing this work in meaningful collaboration with policymakers and local actors can have the most significant impacts: by devoting more attention to the contexts in which we implement policies, we can better understand how people will react to them.

In my job market paper, entitled **“Decentralization of Land Governance and Elections in Burkina Faso”**, I study how politicians respond to the decentralization of land governance in Burkina Faso. In interpreting their responses, to what extent are politicians motivated by the new potential for private rents versus a concern for how these offices can shape constituent welfare? I develop a theoretical model of these dual motivations, and test its implications using municipal elections during the experimental pilot phase of a land governance decentralization reform. I find a causal increase of 0.8 additional parties contesting elections in anticipation of receiving a pilot-phase local land office, although voter turnout is lower than expected and elections do not become meaningfully more competitive. After implementation, which involved the documentation of land rights, both parties and voters behave similarly to their control municipality counterparts. The model also predicts heterogeneity in political responses according to different qualitative tensions in existing customary land rights systems. Using these differential responses, I argue that politicians are not only driven by their own private rents, but also demonstrate a policy-centric focus on constituent welfare. These dual motivations speak to a trade-off in decentralization: despite the potential for efficiency gains and accountability to local populations, more localized government could be more vulnerable to elite capture, so the motivations of politically active elites are important.

In another paper, **“Customary Tenure and Agricultural Investment in Uganda”**, I explore the implications of distributed customary land rights for agricultural investment behavior. Multiple rightsholders over a piece of land interact strategically, and these interactions can affect the perceived security of tenure. I incorporate this strategic interaction from the social context in a model of agricultural investment to make detailed predictions about how farmers under different tenure regimes invest in short- and long-term inputs in different land value environments. I explicitly consider how rising land values, driven by sales options to outsiders, may lead local elites to assert their historic right to sell land to outsiders. The farmer, anticipating this, may actually make fewer

long-term investments on customary land as land values rise, in contrast to the freehold case. I empirically test the implications of this model using survey data from four regions of Uganda, exploiting the fact that many Ugandan farmers operate several parcels under different tenure regimes by using a household fixed effects specification. Unlike many previous papers which have conceptually modeled the impacts of tenure security but then used tenure type as a proxy, I consider tenure type and the incentives it creates throughout my model, therefore linking more closely to my empirical tests.

The data I use in this second paper comes from the baseline survey I designed for the **Agriculture Cluster Development Project Impact Evaluation**, which I collaborate on with the World Bank’s Development Impact Evaluation (DIME) Team and Uganda’s Ministry of Agriculture, Animal Industry and Fishery. This project assesses the effects of a time-limited e-voucher subsidy program for improved agricultural inputs on the use of, returns to, and learning about farm inputs by smallholders. Despite the prevalence of input subsidies attempting to improve agricultural productivity, there is relatively little rigorous evidence about their impacts. We devote particular attention to optimal subsidy levels, both over time and over heterogeneous populations facing different constraints on experimentation and adoption of new technologies (and who are embedded in different social networks). Working closely with government partners is key to this project: despite tensions in conducting a randomized control trial within a government program, we are measuring the impact of the program as actually implemented, and are able to improve policy directly.

I have an additional body of work exploring relationships between market structure and childhood nutrition. One paper, entitled **“Markets and Nutrition in Rural Burkina Faso,”** uses a rich dataset of rural markets to explore how market sophistication is related to early childhood nutritional outcomes, with a particular attention to distributional effects. I have also published a paper entitled **“Replacing Iron-Folic Acid with Multiple Micronutrient Supplements Among Pregnant Women: Costs, Impacts, and Cost-Effectiveness”** in the *Annals of the New York Academy of Science* (joint with Reina Engle-Stone, Sika M. Kumordzie, and Steve Vosti). This collaboration with nutritionists used effect sizes from a meta-analysis of multiple micronutrient supplements during pregnancy on different sub-groups, and built a quantitative tool that would model scaling up this intervention to an entire country’s population, given baseline demographic characteristics, risk factors, and existing prevalence of adverse birth outcomes.

Over the next few years, I plan to broaden my scope to other dimensions of informal social institutions (particularly property rights), as well as interactions between customary institutions and the state. I have several early-stage projects focusing on different dimensions of customary institutions in Sub-Saharan Africa (using theoretical and empirical approaches). In a paper in progress, I quantitatively document the extent to which socially-embedded customary tenure arrangements are stressed by outside land pressures, using Prindex data on perceptions of tenure security. I have also developed a theoretical model of how customary norms can change in a pluralistic environment in response to formal legal changes. Finally, I am planning three direct extensions of my job market paper. The first tests the validity of quasi-experimental methods against an experimental benchmark in the context of a decentralization reform. A second explores the welfare implications of this decentralization and elite capture using additional survey data, and the third studies relationships and conflicts between farmers and pastoralists in Burkina Faso in land and politics.