

# Research Statement

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My research contributes to literatures on agricultural and resource economics, complex property rights (particularly customary tenure in Africa), political economy, and gender. Many of my papers use quasi-experimental methods, with a particular attention to the distribution of effects. Broadly, my research draws upon qualitative work to incorporate key nuances about human behavior into sharper predictions from quantitative models for empirical work. Property rights are fundamental to investment and prosperity, and land tenure in particular is critical for poor farmers to make long-term investments and improve agricultural productivity. In much of Sub-Saharan Africa, customary tenure, a socially-created and enforced, typically undocumented traditional form of land rights, predominates. Economists have generally focused on the undocumented and therefore theoretically less secure nature of customary tenure when compared with freehold land, where the owner enjoys all rights in perpetuity. By contrast, qualitative work has emphasized the socially-constructed nature of customary tenure, where multiple individuals may hold overlapping rights over a single piece of land. My work incorporates these social dynamics of property rights into economic models and empirical tests.

In my paper titled “Decentralization of Land Governance and Elections in Burkina Faso” (currently under review), I look at the implications of these multiple customary rightsholders in the political arena. I use the experimental pilot phase of a land governance decentralization, which created local land offices in municipalities, and measure politicians’ responses. Using election data, I find a causal increase of 0.9 additional political parties contesting elections in anticipation of receiving a land office, but no differences after implementation (which involved the documentation of land rights). In interpreting this response, to what extent are politicians motivated by the potential for private revenues versus a policy-centric concern for how the new offices can shape constituent welfare? I develop a theoretical model of these dual motivations, and test its implications for heterogeneity in responses temporally and following tensions in existing customary systems. Because rights are held by multiple individuals, documenting rights can have distributional consequences that make it a political matter. This paper speaks to a trade-off in the political economy literature on 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.

Another paper which explores the political economy of the implementation of agricultural development programs is entitled “Co-opting Co-ops: Targeting a Subsidy for Agricultural Inputs in Uganda” (with Sam Bird and Michael R. Carter). During my graduate studies, I was involved in the impact evaluation of the Agriculture Cluster Development Project of Uganda’s Ministry of Agriculture, Animal Industries, and Fisheries (funded by the World Bank). This project provided time-limited subsidies for inputs such as fertilizer and improved seeds through an electronic voucher system. As in many programs that seek to reduce implementation costs, enrollment was targeted through existing farmer groups; leaders were more likely to participate than their members, but some groups were remarkably more effective than others in enrolling their members. We use data from the baseline survey we conducted for the impact evaluation; this impact evaluation was called off in 2020 due to implementation problems stemming in part from these farmer organizations. However, we use this opportunity to study program implementation dynamics. The

literature has suggested a trade-off in leader sophistication vs. similarity to the members in their ability to disseminate information and foster social learning, which is consistent with the characteristics of leaders in our data. We find that leader sophistication is strongly predictive of member enrollment in the e-voucher program, while similarity is less so.

Using this same baseline data from Uganda (which I supervised collection of), I have a paper which addresses existing agricultural investment under different tenure arrangements entitled “Customary Tenure and Agricultural Investment in Uganda” (revise and resubmit requested at AJAE). The evidence about whether customary tenure systems are secure enough to provide investment incentives is mixed across Africa; I argue this can be reconciled with a more nuanced model of the social nature of customary tenure. The fact that rights are held by multiple individuals may not in itself make tenure less secure, but as land pressures rise, elites who hold transfer rights may face more incentive to expropriate land for sale to outsiders – making those parcels insecure, and reducing optimal investment. I develop a theoretical model and then test its implications empirically, finding that long-term input use responds to rising land values more strongly on freehold rather than customary parcels. This paper, which quasi-experimentally documents the wider impacts of elite capture, also has relevance for the political economy literature.

In “Tenure Insecurity and the Continuum of Documentation in a Matrilineal Customary System” (joint with Helder Zavale and currently under review), we similarly explore the complexities of tenure insecurity in a customary tenure system. This paper, which uses data from Mozambique, focuses on the gendered sources and covariates of tenure insecurity regarding either private disputes or collective expropriation. Interestingly, men feel less secure than women in the same households; this striking pattern is unlike most of the continent, and likely stems from the matrilineal (that is, inheritance passing through the maternal line) system that predominates in the region but has been relatively under-studied. We also examine the impacts of a variety of government land rights documentation interventions, ranging from community delimitation to full certification of rights. Importantly, my coauthor on this paper is from and in the Global South; I seek to make international development research less extractive, but also his local knowledge of Mozambique is crucial to this paper’s truth.

Another, newer project focusing on the nexus of gender and property rights, is provisionally titled “Women’s Empowerment and Property Rights” (with Cheryl Doss and Ruth Meinzen-Dick). We use a dataset collected in four countries to develop a module on women’s empowerment for national statistical surveys; importantly, it has information about the rights that women and men have to land, as well as how they make decisions. We are focused first on the relationship between the jointness of rights and the jointness of decisionmaking, and secondly on exploring how rights to a dwelling may differ from those to agricultural land, which historically has been the focus of the agricultural economics literature but may be differently gendered than the ‘household.’ We also probe the limitations of these internationally-comparable survey modules in terms of the questions that can be answered.

Women’s empowerment is also at the heart of a project on women smallholders’ resilience to agricultural shocks in Uganda, in collaboration with Florence Kyoheirwe Muhanguzi, Susan Kavuma, Brenda Boonabaana, Grace Bantebya Kyomuhendo, Losira Sanya, and Nargiza Ludgate. This project is funded by an Advancing Local Leadership, Innovation and Networks (ALL-IN) grant from the USAID Feed the Future Innovation Lab for Markets, Risk & Resilience and the International Centre for Evaluation and Development. Women smallholders are particularly vulnerable to climate-change related shocks, given their exclusion from markets and agricultural technologies. We are conducting a randomized control trial

(RCT) to test the effectiveness of a package of interventions, including a revolving fund and trainings on agronomic practices, business skills, and gender transformation – and to see if there are synergies. This is an extremely multi-disciplinary team, led by scholars at Makerere University; we have already published one qualitative journal article (“The Meanings of Resilience in Climate Justice: Women Smallholder Farmers’ Responses to Agricultural Shocks in Uganda under the Spotlight”) in *Agenda*, a South African feminist journal. We also have a forthcoming book chapter (“The Influence of Sociocultural Factors on Women Smallholder Farmers’ Empowerment in Uganda”) in *Women and Smallholder Farming: Addressing Global Inequalities in Agriculture*, edited by Carolyn Sachs and Paige Castellanos. Both publications primarily use the qualitative data from the mixed-methods baseline survey, but we also plan a more quantitative article targeted at an economics journal once we have endline results from the RCT (data collection ongoing).

My interest in complex property rights has also led to a new collaboration outside of the Sub-Saharan African context. This project, on Heirs’ Property in the US, is joint work with Wesley Burnett, Clayton Winters-Michaud, Tor Tolhurst, and James Brady Deaton. Heirs’ property, much like customary tenure in Africa, involves rights being held by multiple individuals, and their ability to manage the land and make investments (including agricultural) depends on the social dynamics between rightsholders. Also like customary tenure, heirs’ property is largely in a grey area in terms of documentation, making it legally uncertain. We have a rich national dataset of heirs’ property, and are interested in quasi-experimentally examining how heirs’ property is used in comparison to other forms of property, as well as the impacts of legal changes in some states around the heirs’ property framework.

I have three other projects which are less closely related to the main body of my work. The first, “Markets and Child Nutrition in Rural Burkina Faso” (joint with Steve Vosti and Jenni James) documents the relationship between children’s nutritional status (measured anthropometrically, rather than as a measure of diet quality) and the quality of the markets they live in. Rural consumer markets in developing countries are relatively understudied, but play an important role in global food systems. This paper also pays particular attention to the distribution of children’s nutritional status; although there is a correlation at the mean, it is much weaker for the smallest children. In my work with Colin Lily, a former undergraduate student I mentored at Villanova, we again focus on the distribution of relationships – in this case, “Examining the Distributional Effects of School Quality on Student Outcomes” (currently under review). We find that although there is a mean effect of school value added on long-run student income and socioeconomic status, the impact of attending better schools is substantially greater for lower-income students. Finally, given my interest in and use of quasi-experimental methods throughout my research, I participated in the Many Economists project. This project, led by Nick Huntington-Klein, explores ‘researcher degrees of freedom’ in quasi-experimental methods.

In future work, I plan to continue my work on complex property rights, in collaboration with existing and new partners. For example, one paper in progress with the PDRI-DevLab team at the University of Pennsylvania looks at land rights governance in Burkina Faso, using the impact evaluation data from the experimental reform I study in my job market paper. Potential funding sources include USAID Feed the Future Innovation Labs such as the one on Markets, Risk & Resilience, the World Bank (DIME team, Gender Innovation Labs, or the LSMS-ISA), as well as cooperative agreements from the USDA Economics Research Service (particularly for the project on heirs’ property).