

LESSONS FROM SOLID GROUND: COUNTRY CASE STUDY

EXPANDING SECURITY

OF TENURE IN CÔTE D'IVOIRE

BACKGROUND

Conflicts and tensions around land play an important role in the recent history and current context of Côte d'Ivoire, in West Africa. In the 1980s, after a period of economic growth and poverty reduction unique within the region, the country saw rapid population growth and economic decline that led unemployed urban young people to return to rural villages searching for alternative, land-based livelihoods.ⁱ They found that most arable land was already being cultivated, often by migrants from other parts of the country or from neighboring states, as a result of previous public policies that encouraged immigration to make productive use of agricultural lands. In 1998, the Rural Land Law predicated land ownership on Ivorian citizenship and further increased tensions between indigenous landowners and foreign-born farmers.ⁱⁱ Up to now, the root causes of land conflicts remain fundamentally unaddressed, including poverty that is overwhelmingly concentrated in rural areas, and important gender disparities.ⁱⁱⁱ Legal pluralism brings additional challenges to the land governance frameworks.

In 2017, while Habitat for Humanity Côte d'Ivoire was conducting two main building programs,^{iv} it discovered that many people in rural villages did not have proper land documentation. This not only was preventing these families from accessing Habitat's programs to build houses and improve their living conditions, but also was exposing them to a greater risk of land conflicts, including important inheritance issues affecting mainly women/widows. **It became imperative for Habitat Côte d'Ivoire to promote access to land tenure security, integrating advocacy as an important component of its other programmatic areas, as part of the Solid Ground campaign.**

ADVOCACY METHODOLOGIES AND TOOLS

Habitat Côte d'Ivoire's advocacy methodology started with a **baseline study** to assess the land frameworks in the context of legal pluralism and facing new legislation. The aim was to better understand the challenges and opportunities for an advocacy program in the country. The main issues identified were twofold. On the one hand, many people living in the villages didn't see the need to document and register the land where they have been living for generations. Indeed, farmland is often held and transferred according to customary law, decided by village chiefs who consider a lineage of original inhabitants of the area.^v "People are used to simply trusting that their chiefs, neighbors and families will know that the land belongs to them," says M Yao Jean-Jacques, Habitat Côte d'Ivoire's national director.

On the other hand, the baseline study shed light on the fact that there was no system in place for the village authorities to issue formal land certificates, which is the first step in the process to register land and apply for a bank loan and building permit.^{vi} Village chiefs were not sufficiently aware and did not have the technical capacity to issue land certificates according to the most recent legal provisions, and that was blocking an entire chain of processes to ensure tenure security in rural villages.

A combination of these issues had a severe impact on women's tenure security: both village chiefs and citizens, including women themselves, underestimate the need for women to document their property. Women's lower levels of legal awareness, combined with conservative customary norms, preclude women from owning land independently of their male relatives. As a result, widows are constantly being disinherited and evicted through land grabbing.

The objectives of Habitat Côte d'Ivoire's advocacy program became increasingly clear through the baseline study. Habitat for Humanity Côte d'Ivoire had to work across all levels of society. At community level, it worked to **raise awareness of community members** through a number of sensitization meetings about the need to register land, helping to clarify misconceptions about women's property rights. It also helped **organize and train village chiefs and authorities** through a number of informative and sensitization meetings to raise awareness of their role according to the current legal provisions. A **local committee** formed by village authorities and community members was set up to facilitate the technical process of identifying land that could be allocated for housing, measuring and parcelling the land, getting all documents from applicants, issuing land certificates by village chiefs, and registering land certificates at local government agencies. **Coalition groups** were established in each district to promote peer exchanges among village chiefs and between them and the local government representatives. These groups became a type of community of practice. The **national government** was engaged in strategic moments to ensure that the new land certificate system and registration would be aligned with the national frameworks. This work was supported by **policy research** and the development of **position papers** with recommendations.

IMPACT, SUCCESSES AND LESSONS

Through this new land certificate system, over 1,132 land certificates have been issued. "When we visit these areas today, people come to us showing the land certificate in their hands," M Yao Jean-Jacques says. "This is the first time these people have access to a valid document proving their right to property, with a stamp from the local government." Once the system is in place, the local committees in each village continue to issue and deliver land certificates, and this number is likely to grow. For that, it was crucial to train village representatives to sustain the work after Habitat's direct intervention.

Strong coalition groups were also key for the implementation and success of this initiative. "These groups worked as a learning platform where chiefs could learn from one another in many aspects, from conflict resolution to technical work with the geometer, to political aspects of organizing communities," M Yao Jean-Jacques says. "Village chiefs were also engaging with the local government representatives, while local governments could learn from the field challenges and try to facilitate and improve processes."

One of the important points discussed in these coalition groups was the need to engage women in the local committees and to raise awareness among village chiefs that women, especially widows, can and should register their property. Since this is still a sensitive issue, consensus was usually built based on positive evidence from other villages during these coalition group meetings. Habitat Côte d'Ivoire and local government representatives played an important role in changing village chiefs' perceptions.

Community organizing and awareness raising also were strong points of this advocacy strategy. Both women and men need legal literacy programs to educate them about their rights, and people are starting to understand the importance of having proper land certificates. Through a series of information and education campaigns, there are signs of change in the perceptions of both men and women in the villages. This is likely to contribute to overcoming gender inequality, but changing behaviors and challenging social norms takes a long time.

This system is replicable in other villages and other districts in the country. Habitat Côte d'Ivoire's goal is to ensure that all villages in the districts where they work implement this system. Habitat is already seen as a reference organization in implementing this system, which can help it scale and replicate the system in other villages and even

move into the next step of land registration, working with the Ministry of Construction toward the ACD (the highest land certificate). There are still 6,068 land certificates to be issued, which will result in 30,340 people being less likely to face eviction in the case of overlapping land claims.

Further information on how Habitat for Humanity is working to expand security of tenure through advocacy in other countries is available in the [Secure Tenure & Land Issue Brief](#).

i USAID. 2013. Côte d'Ivoire Country Land Tenure and Property Rights Profile.

ii World Bank. 2017. Cote d'Ivoire Land Policy Improvement and Implementation Project (P157206).

iii World Bank. 2017. Cote d'Ivoire Land Policy Improvement and Implementation Project (P157206).

iv Save and Build program for low-income families who can get a loan from the bank, and the Orphan and Vulnerable Group program, fully subsidized by government.

v USAID. 2013. Côte d'Ivoire Country Land Tenure and Property Rights Profile.

vi The formal land registration process starts when the village chiefs issue land certificates, then the Ministry of Construction issues the highest governmental land ownership certificate (Arrêté de Concession Définitive, or ACD), required to apply for bank loans. Only then can building permits be issued.



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