Blog "Sustainable Land Management in Sub-Saharan Africa: Improving livelihoods through local research"

INTRODUCTION

Our blog is intended for project staff as well as interested stakeholders from science, policy and practice, to share experiences and mutually learn. It is an opportunity to showcase the multi-faceted nature in which we improve livelihoods and support sustainable land management through local research.

This current blog, prepared by the **DecLaRe** teams at WASCAL and PIK, shares experiences from workshops held in Benin last year to develop land governance scenarios. The two-day workshop in Parakou validated research results and developed future land governance scenarios, which were consequently discussed during a workshop with farmers in Boukoussera. The outcomes of the workshop are expected to inform policymaking and agricultural extension strategies, as well as setting new research directions on land governance and SLM in northern Benin.

BRINGING TOGETHER STAKEHOLDERS — RETHINKING LAND GOVERNANCE IN NORTHERN BENIN

If Benin is to accelerate the adoption of sustainable land management (SLM) practices, strengthening tenure security is no longer optional. On 16 and 17 September 2025, WASCAL brought together 38 stakeholders, including researchers, farmers, traditional leaders, policymakers, practitioners and extension workers, under the **DecLaRe** (Decision Support for Strengthening Land Resilience in the Face of Global Challenges) project. The aim was to jointly rethink how land governance could unlock more SLM practices in northern Benin. The event comprised a two-day indoor workshop at the University of Parakou. The workshop combined dissemination of scientific results with participatory scenario building to improve understanding of the influence of land tenure security on agricultural decision-making.

SETTING THE SCENE: WHY LAND GOVERNANCE MATTERS FOR SLM

Northern Benin is characterized by agricultural expansion, demographic pressure, climate change, and a growing demand for arable land. In such a setting, secure land tenure is essential for farmers to invest in soil fertility management, agroforestry, composting, intercropping or fencing. However, land tenure security in rural Benin is not uniform. While customary systems remain dominant, new forms of ownership recognition have emerged, such as the *Attestation de Détention Coutumière* (ADC), offering households administrative recognition without replacing customary rights entirely. The research presented at the workshop in the context of northern Benin focused on investigations into how farmers as a group, migrants, women, men, and youth as sub-groups perceive these systems, and how these perceptions shape land-related decisions.

Photo 1. Group photo of the workshop's participants

DISSEMINATION OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

During the two-day workshop, the first session was a presentation of the results of the mental model research conducted by a **DecLaRe** PhD fellow. Using the M-Tool, the study captured the perceived consequences of ADC and its socio-demographic variations in northern Benin. The study identified twelve drivers, categorized into three groups:

- **Agriculture and environmental drivers**: agricultural productivity, food security, environmental conservation

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- **Economy and infrastructure drivers**: economic stability, access to credit, land investment, infrastructure development
- **Social cohesion and equity dynamics**: conflicts, women's empowerment, cultural preservation, migration, land grabbing

The research was presented through visual maps illustrating the interactions between key drivers and customary land. This sparked curiosity and reflection. This was followed by a lively discussion in which participants validated the findings with insights from their own experience in the field, highlighting a shared view that land governance is complex and requires collective reasoning that goes beyond research alone.

Photo 2. Presentation of the research findings par Miss Melika Vodounhessi, a DecLaRe PhD fellow

VALIDATION OF RESEARCH FINDINGS THROUGH A WORLD CAFÉ

The key activity on the first day of the workshop involved stakeholders working in groups in a World Café format to validate and enrich the research findings. There were three café tables, each representing one group of drivers. Initially, each group was assigned to a specific café table. Afterwards, the groups rotated through three rounds, ensuring that by the end of the session, all participants had been engaged with each group of drivers.

Each table had a guidance sheet summarizing the drivers' description and mechanisms of potential influence as evidenced by the research findings. During the discussions, one farmer pointed out that the issue of agricultural productivity cannot be addressed without acknowledging the fact that women have limited access to land. A municipal representative insisted that conflicts are not only about land

scarcity but also about unclear inheritance rules and having only one name on the ADC. An extension worker noted that credit programmes often fail because they do not align with crop calendars or household cash cycles. By the end of the afternoon, the initial mental models had become richer and more grounded in real-world experience.

Photo 3. Group work during the word café

On the second day, the focus shifted towards refining and verifying five visual maps based on the mental models. To facilitate interactive discussions, the visual maps were printed and pinned to the walls of the workshop room. One map was aggregated and four were disaggregated by gender and migration status, respectively. Participants were asked to identify arrows on each map that needed to be reversed, added, strengthened or removed, from their own perspective. They were also asked to question arrows, confirm strong links, raise questions about others, and mark uncertainties.

CO-CREATING NARRATIVE SCENARIOS ON THE ROLE OF LAND GOVERNANCE IN SLM

Refinement and validation of the research findings paved the way for the final workshop task, namely the co-construction of three narrative scenarios on the role of land governance in SLM through group work. These scenarios were not intended to predict the future, but rather to explore the potential interaction between policy, investment, customary institutions, and household decisions in producing different land outcomes. Participants explored three possible futures based on the level of

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land tenure security: high (more than 75% of land formally registered), medium (50% registered), and low (less than 25% registered). For each scenario, groups considered the following key questions: What social dynamics are likely to emerge by 2050? Who the winners and losers will be among different groups (women, men, youth, migrants, and non-migrants)? How will government institutions or structures evolve? What will be the impacts on land use (agriculture, grazing, forestry, conservation, and urban expansion)? What will the effects be on the 12 drivers, and any other observations. This exercise linked research findings with local knowledge, helping stakeholders to envision plausible futures and to identify leverage points for sustainable land management.

Photo 4. Group work during the co-construction of the three narrative scenarios

WHAT DID PARTICIPANTS TAKE AWAY FROM THE WORKSHOP?

By the end of the second day of the workshop, the three narrative scenarios were presented in a plenary session. Although they differed in emphasis—one highlighted an aggregated system; one a gendered dynamic; and the other migrant dynamics—together they painted a clear picture: improving SLM requires strengthening land tenure security, reducing uncertainty, and improving coordination between customary governance, formal institutions, and agricultural support systems.

Participants left with a sense of ownership over the outcomes. Most of them expressed appreciation that their experiences had been used not just to collect data, but also to inform collective reasoning and scenario building.

Additionally, after the workshop in Parakou the results were shared with farmers in Boukoussera through discussions conducted in local languages with Bariba and Fulani groups.

Photo 5. Group work during the workshop with local communities in Boukoussera

LOOKING AHEAD

The outcomes of the workshop are expected to inform policymaking and agricultural extension strategies, as well as setting new research directions on land governance and SLM in northern Benin. Land governance has evolved from legal and academia to shared problem-solving exercise grounded in real-life experiences. In a region facing climate stress, demographic changes, and competing land use demands, such exercises are essential.

VIDEO HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE WORKSHOP:

▶ English version: https://youtu.be/jRActi8I81U?si=6WCkwbPKo4vm0k9C

▶ French version: https://youtu.be/GivTsjEIPBI?si=E441NCGYO4oiGsLR

PHOTOS

Photos courtesy of **DecLaRe**.

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FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

Funded by the German Federal Ministry of Research, Technology and Space (BMFTR), within the strategy of its platform Research for Sustainability (Forschung für Nachhaltigkeit, FONA), the **INTERFACES** project works with four regional projects – **COINS**, **DecLaRe**, **InfoRange** and **Minodu** – to strengthen the integration, coherence and reach in the area of sustainable land management.

MEDIA

Follow us for updates on the research programme on our website and follow us on LinkedIn and on D-Groups.

PREVIOUS BLOG CONTRIBUTIONS

"SLM in SSA: 2025 Highlights and 2026 Outlook"

"A Living Glossary for a Changing Climate: Co-Creation, Local Knowledge, and Oral Transmission"

"Co-Designing Digital Solutions for Pastoralists"

"Digital Inclusion for Pastoralists"

"Bridging Research and Action: Insights from Guiè's Sahelian Hedgerow Innovation"

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2024 - Fostering gender-responsive innovation adoption among smallholder farmers in Africa

LATEST COLLEQUIUM SERIES

"Towards sustainable agroforestry in Benin and Ghana: Findings from a two-year experiment on fertilizer microdosing" by Géronime Houeto

"Land Tenure Security and Local Perceptions: Results of Mental Models' Study and Implications for Governance in Northern Benin" by Mélika Vodounhessi

"Peer-Assisted Smartphone Learning to Support Participatory App-Design with Pastoralist Communities in Northern Kenya" by Rufo Roba Compagnone (née Halakhe)

"Participatory Learning Platforms: Lessons for strengthening the upscale of sustainable land management and agricultural innovations in Ghana" by Dr. Peter Asare-Nuamah

LATEST VIDEOS

DecLaRe: WASCAL Stakeholder Workshop on land governance and land resilience

Towards a Participatory Learning Platform (PLP): Impressions from PLP members

Youth's Role in Innovation - COP16 Side Event

Impressions from Tropentag 2025

Photovoice Project by Cecile Poitevin