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Realising land rights and social accountability through community-based organisations

The impacts of India's Homestead Programme



- In brief:**
- This study uses a mixed-methods randomised impact evaluation to shed light on two broad policy questions: First, how and to what extent can development interventions improve the governance of social protection through attempts to induce community mobilisation? Second, how can the homestead land rights of marginalised populations be improved?
 - The programme's core is the formation and training of community-based organisations (CBOs) that assist untitled households in applying for title, inform them of their rights more broadly, and help to mobilise community pressure on government officials for efficient service delivery.
 - Results suggest that the intervention exerted strong positive effects on perceived land security and access to government entitlements, as well as moderate effects on asset ownership and homestead satisfaction. However, no statistically significant effects on investment or food security were detected.
 - The formation of CBOs represents a potentially powerful technology of social accountability that can sustainably increase knowledge, provide civic support channels, and help households to access much-needed resources without relying on profit-seeking intermediaries.

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Overview of the research

How and to what extent can development interventions improve the governance of social protection through attempts to induce community mobilisation? And how can homestead land rights be improved for marginalised populations? The present study attempted to address elements of these questions through a mixed-methods randomised impact evaluation of a land rights intervention in the Bihar state of India.

The intervention was designed and implemented by the civil society organisation, Deshkal Society: “Homestead Land Rights in Villages of Gaya District” (referred to henceforth as “the Homestead Programme”). The term *homestead*, as used in Indian land-related policy discourse, refers to the land on which a household’s dwelling is constructed.

Bihar state law guarantees each rural household the right to hold title over a homestead plot. In most cases, this means issuance of title to the land on which the household already lives. However, many poor households continue to lack formal rights of any kind. This is particularly so for members of the Scheduled Caste (SC) community; Bihar’s most marginalised social category.

The Homestead Programme was intended to establish, train, and mobilise village-level CBOs, of roughly 20 SC individuals each, to assist the village’s untitled SC households in obtaining homestead title. Deshkal Society field staff trained CBOs to provide local households with information about homestead land rights, assist them in applying for title, maintain contact with local government officials, and, where necessary, mobilise community pressure toward holding officials accountable for title delivery.

The study tested the effects of the Homestead Programme on nine categories of outcomes: 1) Perceived land security, 2) dwelling investment, 3) homestead-based livelihood activities, 4) knowledge of government services, 5) use of government services, 6) access to government services (without resorting to bribery or use of a paid government intermediary), 7) assets, 8) food security, and 9) homestead satisfaction.

A quantitative survey, administered to roughly 1,700 households across 144 villages, enabled estimation of the Homestead Programme’s impacts on each of these categories. Meanwhile, qualitative interviews and focus group discussions with dozens of stakeholders and key informants supported substantive descriptions of ground-level processes associated with the programme and identification of mechanisms through which the programme exerted its effects.

Policy motivation: Social accountability and land rights

This study contributes to debates at the intersection of two main policy arenas: Social accountability and land rights. First, social accountability programmes are those that seek to leverage pressure from potential programme beneficiaries to discipline service delivery agencies into good governance and improved service delivery. Social accountability strategies now feature prominently in the portfolios of government agencies, bilateral donors, philanthropic foundations, and grassroots movements alike.

But the two existing models of social accountability strategies that have been rigorously evaluated thus far — information campaigns and citizenship training programmes — have shown mixed results. Practitioners also require a robust body of evidence on a wider variety of programme models to build up a workable repertoire of effective strategies.

While the Homestead Programme includes information and citizenship training elements, its model sets it apart through its reliance on CBOs, which are intended to institutionalise knowledge and political will within communities. This CBO model may be promising in light of longstanding sociological theories of organisational behaviour and social movements: They suggest that formal organisations with the capacity to mobilise physical and emotional resources often serve as necessary conditions for sustained mobilisation.

Meanwhile, a robust body of development economics research has demonstrated the centrality of land security in shaping investment patterns and livelihood outcomes. Numerous studies have been conducted on rural agricultural land security as well as urban residential land and housing security. However, few, if any, rigorous studies have been conducted on rural residential land rights.

This dearth of research is unfortunate because in Bihar, as in sizable swathes of Africa and Asia, the poorest and most marginalised population segments live in rural areas and do not own their own agricultural land. In such contexts, where households also lack secure rights to their homestead land, it becomes difficult to envision equitable development without the legal, economic, and psychological security that comes with strong land rights.

While policymakers widely tout the need for land rights improvements, designing and especially implementing meaningful land policy reforms has been an uphill struggle in India. In Kerala and West Bengal, the two states generally agreed to have experienced the most successful land reforms, changes were driven in large part by bottom-up mobilisation. The present study also holds implications for the extent to which such episodes of mobilisation can be sparked by a civil society development project operating on donor timelines.

Quantitative and qualitative findings:

Results suggest that *the Homestead Programme was overwhelmingly successful in achieving its proximate objectives*. The endline survey, conducted two years after onset of the programme, revealed:

- 817/845 treatment households reported knowing of a land rights organisation within their village, while the corresponding figure was 18/848 within the control group.
- 826 treatment households reported holding title in contrast to only 27 control households.
- The vast majority of respondents with title reported having applied in late 2017 and received title between January and April 2018, more than a year and a half after programme onset.

With respect to the downstream impacts, the programme had strong effects on perceived land security and access to government entitlements, and moderate effects on asset ownership and homestead satisfaction. The difference between treatment and control households' reports of the likelihood of encroachment and eviction was, at two standard deviations, as large as they could have been, given the measurement scale used.

Treatment households were also much more likely than control households to know about a variety of government social protection programmes, to use them, and to expect to be able to use them without having to rely on a paid intermediary. Impacts on dwelling and homestead plot satisfaction were smaller but still positive and significant.

Treatment households were no more likely than control households to own a television, pressure cooker, or electric fan. Nevertheless, treatment households were more likely to have savings, to own a chair or bench, and especially to own a stove. Given that stoves are difficult to move, this finding may constitute suggestive evidence that households are more comfortable investing in immovable assets; a sign of land security.

However, *the study does not find evidence of impacts on investment or food security*. Control households were no more likely than treatment households to invest in dwelling improvements or in dwelling-based livelihood activities. Consistent with the lack of investment impacts, estimates also show no effects on food security (although the lack of impact on food security may also reflect the fact that food security questions were too coarse to pick up meaningful variation).

The qualitative analysis suggests that impacts on investment were constrained not because insecurity was unimportant to investment decisions, but because cash constraints precluded investment even once land rights improved. While actual instances of full-scale eviction are rare, threats of eviction are widespread, and could be sparked by a variety of potential causes; from a landlord's anger to the

government's decision to widen a highway.

The qualitative evidence further revealed the central importance of *dalals*, or paid intermediaries, in the social protection service delivery landscape. While many participants had been able to access social protection resources, they could only do so by hiring parties who would often take large cuts of the resources. *Among the most important potential roles played by CBOs may be their ability to help marginalised SC households bypass dalals and access the state instead through the CBO's civic network.*

Policy recommendations

- **Establish CBOs to institutionalise access to information, political will, and land security.**
This study shows that CBOs present a viable alternative model to information campaigns and citizenship training in the social accountability policy domain.
- **Train government officials to engage with civic leaders rather than profit-seeking intermediaries.**
The study's qualitative data showed that government officials were often more accustomed to interacting with *dalals* than citizens. Officials should be trained and supported in interacting directly with citizens or with legitimate civic representatives.
- **Combine attempts to improve land security with cash or resource transfers to facilitate investment.**
While land insecurity may constrain investment, other factors, such as lack of cash, may also constrain investment. Attempts to strengthen land rights should be integrated with grants of cash or materials, like the housing improvement programme, *Indira Awaas Yojana*.
- **Information technology and biometrics are not enough to improve governance: Civic support systems are required.**
Researchers and practitioners have increasingly turned to information technology and biometric systems, e.g., the *Aadhar* programme, to improve governance. While these have provided a useful set of tools, data from this project suggest that leakage may continue as long as potential beneficiaries lack a civic channel through which to exert pressure for equitable delivery.