

Decentralized Land Management in Burundi: Way Out of Crisis or Yet Another Problem?

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In a context of high tenure insecurity and increasing conflicts over land, Burundi's government recently adopted its first ever land policy guidelines. Borrowing a policy model from Madagascar, the 2009 'land policy letter' foresees the creation of decentralized land services that issue certificates recognizing local land tenure arrangements. By taking explicitly into account customary rules and practices, the new land services are meant to provide for a socially more acceptable and an economically more affordable alternative to the centralized titling system.

Based on fieldwork carried out in 2010 and 2011, this paper questions the implementation of the new policy on the ground. It shows that, despite first appearances, the system is not truly adapted to local realities. By applying only to conflict-free land, it merely deals with the least problematic cases. Also, the new certification system does not provide sufficient protection for people with low bargaining power: by formalizing locally accepted power imbalances, it weakens their position even more. In fact, the real needs and expectations of rural farmers still need to be addressed. The new policy guidelines were entirely prepared by foreign experts and their implementation is almost exclusively financed by international donors, which also raises questions about their viability in the long term.