

Rural Land Regulation and Precarious Rangelands in West Africa: Lessons from Northern Benin

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The back bone of the land bill enacted in October 2007 in Benin is the PFR (*Plan Foncier Rural*), meant to make inventory and register all customary use and ownership rights over each piece of land (including bearing natural resources), in view of securing holders' rights. The process started early 1990s. The context was one of multiple access and unsustainable usages of rural land. The rationale for establishing this land regulatory mechanism was that it would secure use and ownership rights, therefore induce sustainable management and livelihood at community and regional levels.

The pilot soon revealed difficulties for marginal categories (migrants, pastoralists, women, etc.) to claim and get their access/use rights recorded in PFR documents. Generally, field agents in charge tend (and were brought) to focus on exclusive ownership rights for individuals or families, instead of recording multiple access and use rights. Hence, common pool resources as graze lands, lowlands, rangelands, even mountains edges etc. were registered as private ownerships. With the support of MCC funding, some 300 villages are expected to complete PFR process by end 2011. This paper discusses the subsequent threats on the commons, particularly on rangelands in Northern Benin, in an aggravating context of climate change, increasing commercial pressure on agricultural lands and weak political and administrative decentralisation. The paper proceeds discussing the strengths and weaknesses of pastoralists' individual and collective coping strategies, including the delimitations of grazing corridor. It explores promising avenues for stakeholders (pastoralist associations, local governments, state services and NGOs) to develop rural land management dispositions under the current legislation that preserve the commons and secure marginal groups.