

“Fallow Lengths and the Structure of Property Rights”

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Abstract

Across societies, communal land rights have been relatively more common than private land rights, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, and parts of Asia. We test the hypothesis that longer fallowing requirements – the time needed to leave land uncultivated to restore fertility – led to a higher prevalence of communal property rights. Longer fallowing requirements may lead to communal property rights because land that must remain fallow for longer periods is less valuable and benefits more from communal insurance and protection. We construct an ecological measure of the fallow length for the most suitable staple crop across grid cells based on soil type, temperature, and climate. We find that places where land needs to be fallowed for longer periods are more likely to have communal property rights. We then examine the implications for efforts to title land; we find that World Bank land titling interventions are less effective in places with longer fallowing requirements, suggesting a mismatch between development policy and underlying institutions. Finally, we examine implications for income, income inequality, conflict. We find no evidence that longer fallowing requirements affect income levels, but find that they are associated with less inequality and less conflict -- especially in settings with weak states. Our results highlight the origins of property rights structures and how property rights interact with development policies.