Whose Incentives? The Evolution of Inheritance Practices, Intergenerational Conflict, and Women’s Control Over Land in Rural Kenya

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Abstract

Land related investment decisions are shaped by both the formal and informal institutions governing land tenure and acquisition. In the case of agricultural Kikuyu households in Kenya, we show that the inheritance practice of uncertain allocation in conjunction with the principle of equal division among heirs reduces long-term investments in land among potential heirs. This apparent inefficiency is explained by intergenerational power dynamics within the household, as the inheritance practice allows parents to shift the investment incentives facing heirs in their favor. This analytical framework is also used to illustrate that despite legislation formalizing women’s rights to property, control over land continues to follow the informal traditional patrilineal system in important ways.