



Research Article

Land Tenure Systems' Impact on Sustainable Land Management in Kpatawee Clan Communities Suakoko District, Bong County, Liberia

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Abstract

Both customary and statutory land rights characterize Land tenure system in Liberia. The land tenure system practiced in Liberia is known to create confusion and insecurity among local communities regarding land ownership and usage. Despite the importance of land tenure in shaping land use practices, there is limited research on how land tenure systems on sustainable land management in Liberia. This research investigates the impact of the land tenure system on sustainable land management in the Kpatawee clan, Suakoko District, Bong County, Liberia. This research utilized both primary and secondary data sources for the study. The study adopted the random sampling technique for data collection with the targeted sample size of 100 smallholder farmers in the study area. The customary land tenure system was found to be the most dominant tenure system practices in the study area. About 93% of the respondents stated that a secure land tenure system encourages them to undertake long-term investment. In addition, crop rotation and inter-cropping were the commonly used sustainable land management practiced technique adopted in the study area. The study further revealed that smallholder farmers in the Kpatawee clan face challenges such as insecure land rights, limited access to resources, and conflicting land use practices, which hinder the adoption of sustainable land management practices. Consequently, land insecurity, lack of transparency, and weak institutional capacity limit the potential for sustainable land management practices in the study area. The study concludes that land tenure system security strengthens local institutions and supports sustainable land management practice. It is also concluded that improving inclusivity and transparency of land rights are critical for achieving sustainable land management goals in the study area and Liberia in general.

Introduction

Paramount among the determinants of land tenure in Sub-Saharan Africa are ethnicity and its cultural norms, rules, and institutions. Indeed, land allocation and property rights are typically influenced in varying degrees by ethnic customary laws [1]. The recognition of various land tenure systems, from usual practices to formal titles, can facilitate a more nuanced approach to the governance of the land that aligns with the sociocultural identity of the community. Land's possession systems in Bong County, Liberia, play a fundamental role in the definition of land use dynamics, agricultural practices and community livelihoods within the region. Historically,

land ownership in Liberia has gone from traditional communal systems to more individualistic and formalized systems, particularly in post-colonial contexts [2]. The traditional land tenure, through which the land is possessed in communication, is managed in accordance with ancestral customs, contrasts strongly with private property systems backed by the State that have arisen, which leads to complex layers of rights and property intertwined with socioeconomic factors [3]. Farmers in Bong County may be more inclined to invest in sustainable agricultural practices when they have a safe and recognized possession of the land, since this security encourages the planning and management of long-term resources [4]. However, current land disputes, often arise from

competitive claims between local communities, corporations, and government entities, exacerbate uncertainty and hinder the implementation of sustainable practices [5]. Disputes on land ownership can interrupt not only agricultural productivity but also the broader social fabric, which leads to tensions that undermine community cohesion and collective environmental administration. Therefore, understanding the main drivers of land tenure system in Liberia is crucial for developing effective policies and strategies that can unlock the region's agricultural potential and promote inclusive and sustainable economic growth.

The interaction between the security of land tenure and sustainable agricultural practices arises as a cornerstone to address the dual challenges of environmental degradation and the relief of poverty within Bong's county [6]. The sustainable management of the land covers practices that improve agricultural productivity while guaranteeing the conservation of natural resources and ecosystems. The customary land mandate, widespread in Bong County, reflects indigenous traditions and social hierarchies, considerably influencing access to land resources. Dolo [7] says that customary governance structures often prioritize the interests of elite groups within communities, which can marginalize vulnerable populations, especially women and young people. Traditional standards can dictate the use of land and access rights, potentially forcing the capacity of these groups to engage in essential agricultural activities for livelihoods and sustainable practices. The interplay of gender in land systems further complicates the landscape of sustainable land management in Bong County. As such, the interconnection of land management practices, ecological health and community livelihoods in Bong County requires a comprehensive and receptive approach. By aligning land tenure systems with sustainable development principles, it is possible to improve long-term environmental

sustainability while guaranteeing that local communities benefit from these practices.

This research is an attempt to investigate Land tenure systems impact on sustainable land management with a case study of the Kpatawee clan, Suakoko District, Bong County, Liberia. Hence, this study is conducted to investigate the land tenure system's effect on sustainable land management within Bong County, Liberia. Studies on land tenure system effects in Bong County are scanty, where available. Therefore, this study closed the existing knowledge gap on the effect of the land tenure system in managing land resources sustainably. The study provides valuable insights into the effects of land tenure systems in the sustainable management of community land resources in Bong County, Liberia. This study will serve as a baseline for future studies on the land tenure system in the county.

Methodology

Study area

The study was conducted in five (5) selected communities (Balamah town, Raymond's Town, Gokai Town, Kpatawee Town and Barwoquellah Town) in the study area. The Kpatawee region of Liberia is characterized by a complex interplay of land tenure systems that significantly influence sustainable land management practices. This region was named in memory of Suakoko the former chief Suah Koko, as a result of her heroism. Suakoko is the biggest clan among the three main clans in the district and serves as the main commercial hub of the district. The Kpatawee clan is named after the famous Kpatawee waterfall is found within the rainforest zone of Liberia along the st John River, which is among the six major rivers in Liberia. The study area has two pronounced seasons: the rainy and dry seasons (Figure 1).

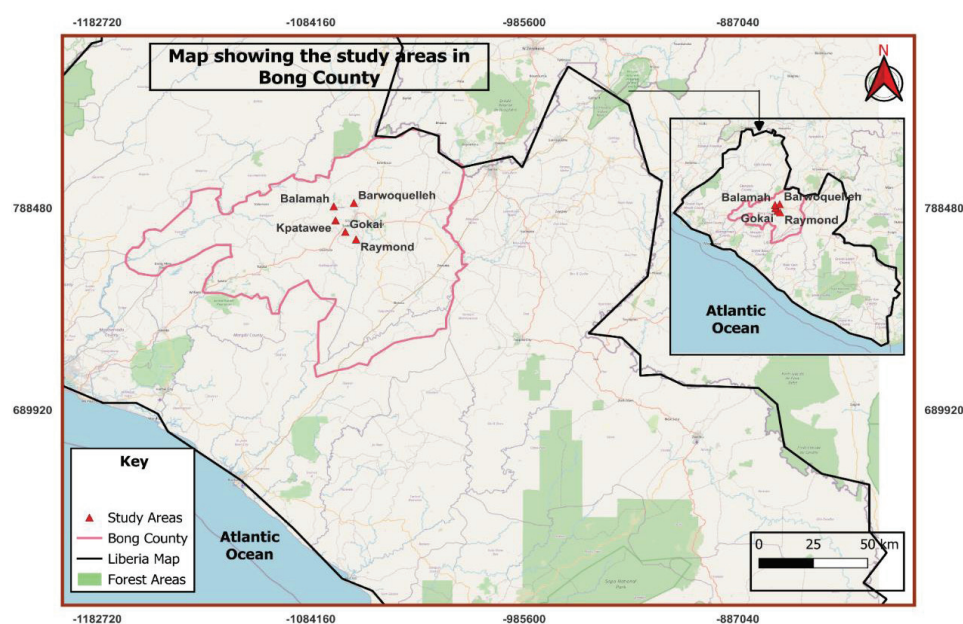


Figure 1: Map showing the study area in Bong County Liberia.

Study design

The study relied on the mixed-methods (Qualitative and Quantitative) approach for the study. Data was collected from Primary and Secondary sources. Primary sources of data were from respondents through the administration of questionnaires. The secondary sources of data were generated from journals, internet searches, articles, reports and publications online.

Target population

The Targeted Population for the study was 1000 smallholder farmer's respondents in the study area.

Sample technique and size

The study used a Stratified random sampling technique to collect data. The sample size for this research was 100 respondents.

Data collection and analysis

A structured questionnaire was developed to collect data on land tenure systems and their implications on sustainable land management practices. The statistical software (e.g., SPSS, version 28) was used to analyze quantitative survey data, in addition, the thematic analysis of interviews to identify key themes related to land tenure impacts was done to collect qualitative data.

Results and interpretation

According to (Table 1) above, the majority of the respondents 61% were within the age range of 46 and above, while 17% were within the age range of 35 to 45 age bracket. The result shows that the majority of the respondents 83% were male, while 17% of the respondents were female. The study revealed that the majority of the respondents (83%) contacted were farmers, while 3% were traders. In the above table 56% of the respondents acquired primary education, while 30% had no formal education. The findings show that 89% of the respondents were married couples, while 4% were single (Table 1).

From the study, customary land tenure was recorded as the most practised land tenure system in the study area, accounting for 65% of respondents. This was followed by the private land tenure system accounting for 33% while the communal system accounted for only 2% respectively (Table 2).

According to the result in (Table 3), 35% of the respondents stated that farming and forestry activities are a threat to their land rights as citizens in the study area. In addition, 20% of the respondents agreed that double land sales and unequal gender access to land 20% are further threats to land rights in the study area.

From the result above, 30% of the respondents stated that boundary demarcation dispute is a serious effect on the land tenure system for sustainable land management practices while 25% of respondents said land use conflict dispute is another serious land tenure system in the study area. In addition, 25%

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents.

Variable	Category	No (N = 100)	%
Age	18 - 25 years	7	7%
	26 - 35 years	15	15%
	36 - 45 years	17	17%
	46 and above years	61	61%
Gender	Male	83	83%
	Female	17	17%
Occupation	Farming	85	85%
	Trading	13	13%
	Government employee	12	12%
Educational Level	Primary school	56	56%
	No formal education	30	30%
	Secondary school	6	6%
	Vocational/technical	3	3%
	Bachelor degree	3	3%
Marital Status	Postgraduate degree	2	2%
	Single (never married)	4	4%
	Married/partnered	89	89%
	Widowed	2	2%
	Divorced/separated	5	5%
Community	Gokai Town	30	30%
	Balamah Town	19	19%
	Raymond Town	17	17%
	Kpatawee Town	19	19%
	Barwoquelleh Town	15	15%
Land Acquisition	Family land	73	73%
	Private/purchased land	13	13%
	Community leader	14	14%
Years Using Land	1 - 10 years	5	5%
	10 - 20 years	10	10%
	20 - 30 years	15	15%
	30 - 50 years	50	50%
	50 - 100 years	20	20%
Land Owned (acres)	1 - 50 acres	15	15%
	51 - 100 acres	35	35%
	101 - 150 acres	25	25%
	151 - 200 acres	15	15%
	201 - 250 acres	6	6%
	251 - 300 acres	4	4%

Source: Researcher's, June 2025.

Table 2: Types of Land Tenure Systems Practised in the Study Area.

Land Tenure System	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Communal land tenure system	2	2%
Customary land tenure	65	65%
Private	33	33%
Total	100	100%

of the respondents noted that land tenure system practice is a societal problem affecting the sustainable management of land resources in the study area (Table 4).

With the above results in Table 5, 45% of the respondents stated that Disputes and Conflicts affect the adoption of sustainable land management practices, while 17% of the respondents said the lack of incentive for long-term investment affects the adoption of sustainable land management practices (Table 5).

According to the results in Figure 2, 38% of respondents adopted the sustainable land management practice of mulching, while 20% of the respondents also adopted the Sustainable Land Management practice of crop rotation in the study area.

Table 6 above highlights how local governance plays a vital role in promoting sustainable land management through various specific systems in the study area.

According to the result stated above, 45% of respondents mentioned that the local government processes in land management are not transparent. While 31% expressed that there are some levels of transparency of local government processes on land management within the study area (Figure 3).

According to the results, 56% of respondents stated that the local governance structure enhanced tenure security in prompting sustainable land management in the study area while 18% of the respondents stated local governance structure improved natural resource management and by extension promoted sustainable land management (Figure 4).

The relationship between land tenure security and income was the independent variable, while sustainable land management was the dependent variable. The R^2 value for the regression is $R^2 = 0.1676$, indicating 16.67% dependent variable variance. The result suggested that the proportion of adoption rate was influenced by the land tenure system in the study area. In social science, a low value R^2 is acceptable and considered statistically significant (Figure 5).

Discussion

The findings presented provide critical insights into land tenure systems, their implications for sustainable land management (SLM), and the role of local governance in Liberia. Below is a detailed discussion of the results, supported by relevant citations and theoretical frameworks. Each major result is analyzed and supported with relevant academic

Table 4: Effects of land tenure system on Sustainable Land Management practices.

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
Land use conflict	25	25%
Land ownership conflict	10	10%
Boundary demarcation dispute	30	30%
Land ownership limit	5	5%
Land right problems	25	25%
Land tenure system practice	15	15%
Total	100	100%

Table 5: Insecure land tenure system effects on the adoption of sustainable land management practices.

Variable	Frequency	Percent
Disputes and Conflicts	45	45%
Hindered Adoption of New Technologies	15	15%
Difficulty Accessing Credit and other Resources	8	8%
Lack of Incentive for Long-Term Investment on lands	17	17%
Increased Vulnerability to Land Grabbing	15	15%
Total	100	100%

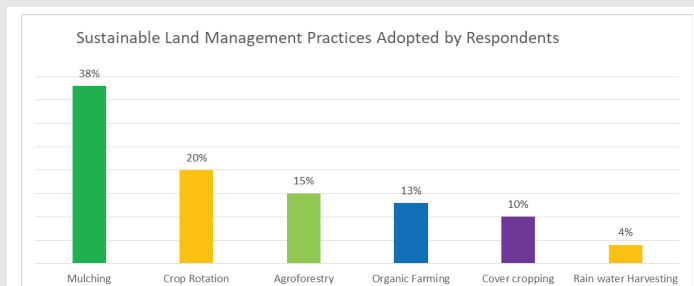


Figure 2: Sustainable Land Management Practices adopted in the study area.

Table 6: The roles of the local governance system in enhancing sustainable land management in the study area.

Role of local governance	Description of roles	Specific Land Governance Systems
Community Engagement	Involves local communities in decision-making	Participatory Land Use Planning
Conflict Resolution	Mediates land disputes among community members	Local Land Dispute Resolution Committees or ad hoc
Resource Management	Oversees sustainable use of land and resources	Community-Based Resource Management (CBRM)
Policy Implementation	Enforces national land policies at local levels	Local Land Policy Implementation
Capacity Building	Trains local leaders on sustainable practices	Training Programs for Local Governance Structures
Monitoring and Evaluation	Assesses land use and management effectiveness	Local Monitoring Committees
Land Tenure Security	Ensures secure land tenure for communities	Community Land Rights Framework

Table 3: Distribution of respondents based on Land right threats in the study area.

Variables	Frequency	Percent
Farming & Forestry Activities	35	35%
Double land sales	20	20%
Local land territory conflict	10	10%
Unequal gender access to land	20	20%
Land grabbing by fraudsters	15	15%
Total	100	100%

literature for context and scholarly depth. The study revealed that the majority of respondents (61%) were aged 46 and above, with 83% being male and 85% engaged in farming (Table 1). This demographic profile suggests that land-related decisions in the study area are predominantly influenced by older males, which aligns with traditional agrarian societies where land ownership and management are often male-dominated [8]. The high percentage of farmers underscores the centrality of

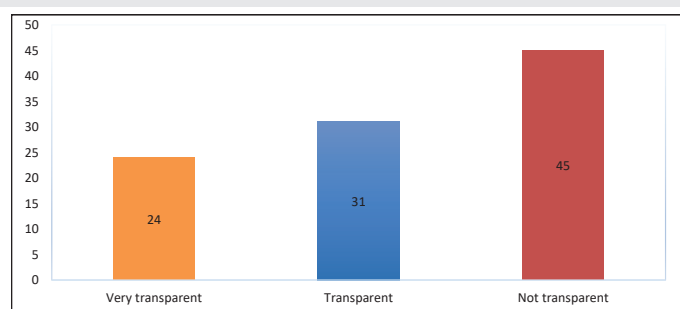


Figure 3: Transparency of local government processes on land management issues.

Effects of Local Governance System in Promoting SLM

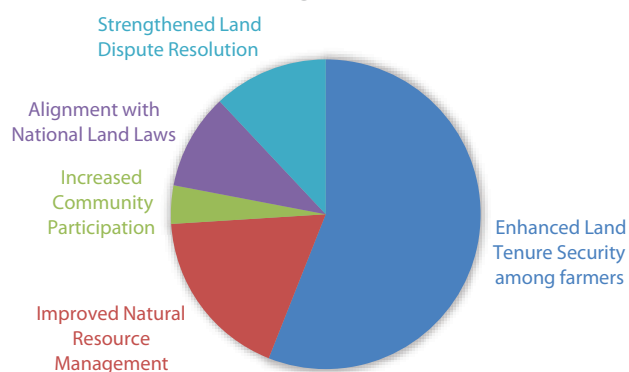


Figure 4: Effects of the local governance system in promoting SLM practices.

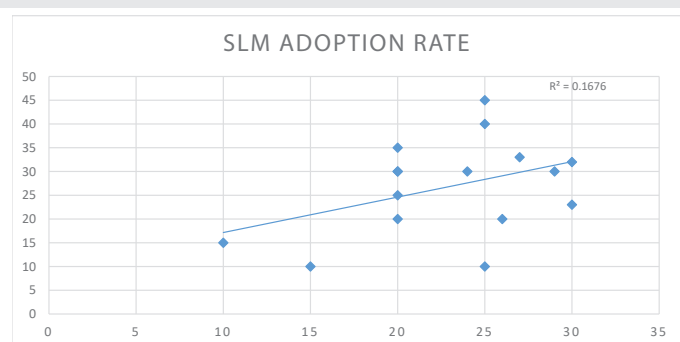


Figure 5: Linear regression determining the relationship between land tenure security and sustainable land management adoption rate.

land to livelihoods, making tenure security a critical issue for sustainable agricultural practices. This age and educational structure are consistent with findings in other rural agricultural contexts in Sub-Saharan Africa, where farming populations are ageing and literacy levels remain low [9]. The male dominance also reflects traditional land inheritance and ownership systems that favour men over women, limiting women's access to land and resources [10]. The dominant land tenure system in the study area is customary (65%), followed by private (33%) and communal (2%). This aligns with studies by Toulmin [11] and Wily [12], who observed that customary systems remain the most widespread form of land tenure across much of rural Africa. This finding also corroborates studies in sub-Saharan Africa, where customary systems coexist with statutory laws, creating tenure ambiguities [1]. These systems, while flexible

and community-based, often lack formal documentation, which can lead to disputes and insecurity, especially in the face of land commodification and urbanization. With boundary demarcation (30%) and land use conflicts (25%) being the most common land tenure system practice a societal problem affecting the sustainable management of land resources in the study area (Table 4). These disputes are symptomatic of insecure tenure, which discourages long-term investments in SLM [13]. On the other hand, insecure tenure also manifested in threats like double land sales (20%) and unequal gender access (20%) (Table 3). Gender disparities in land ownership are well-documented [14], and the study's findings highlight the need for inclusive land policies to address these inequities. Land conflicts are a common challenge in settings where formal and customary systems coexist without clear integration. As Amanor (2012) argue, overlapping claims and weak institutional enforcement mechanisms often contribute to frequent land disputes. This low adoption rate can be attributed to tenure insecurity, which undermines incentives for long-term land improvements [13]. For example, 45% cited disputes as a barrier to SLM adoption (Table 5), while 17% highlighted the lack of incentives for investment. These findings align with Holden and Otsuka [15], who argue that tenure security is a key driver of SLM adoption in Africa. Among those practising SLM, mulching (38%) and crop rotation (20%) were the most common techniques (Figure 2). These practices are relatively low-cost and can be implemented without tenure guarantees, unlike high-investment practices like agroforestry [16]. Despite the importance of SLM, only 26% of respondents practised any sustainable technique. Without secure tenure, farmers are less likely to invest in long-term soil and land conservation practices. Community engagement (Table 6) and conflict resolution were highlighted as key functions. For instance, 56% of respondents acknowledged that local governance enhanced tenure security (Figure 3), supporting Ostrom's [17] theory that localized institutions can effectively manage common-pool resources. Insecurity contributes to disputes (45%), discourages long-term investment (17%), and hinders technology adoption (15%). As noted by Holden and Ghebru [18,19], insecure land tenure diminishes farmers' willingness to adopt practices like agroforestry, mulching, and terracing, which require long-term planning and resource allocation. 45% perceived government processes as non-transparent (Figure 2). These findings reflect broader governance challenges in post-conflict settings, where weak institutions and corruption hinder land administration (Unruh, 2014). The study outlines a local governance hierarchy and highlights key roles such as participatory planning, conflict resolution, and policy enforcement. Ribot [20] notes that decentralized governance can only be effective if local authorities are empowered, trained, and held accountable. Where political interference or lack of transparency exists, local governance may reinforce inequality and conflict. Only 33% found land tenure information accessible, and 45% reported a lack of transparency in land governance. These results resonate with concerns raised by the FAO [21] in the Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure, which emphasise the need for transparency, accountability, and community access to land information systems.

This section discusses the qualitative perspective of land tenure systems practised in the study area and their implications on sustainable land management. *“In this town, chiefs and his elders are the people who give out land to people for farming and building houses. Before giving out land to us we give kola nut as a sign of respect. We experience land disputes almost every year because we do not know the main boundary or demarcation of all our lands. Most of the confusion about land here come from somebody coming to claim our land. Back in those days, our parents’ lands were shared among families, but now some people with papers claim that they own it alone. This causes a lot of violence over our traditional lands. For us to keep our land rich to produce more, we plant different crops after every planting season, like beans or groundnuts after planting maize or cassava on one piece of land to make the land rich again for different crops. We also plant different crops at the same time on one plot of land. This helps us to limit weeds in the field and also support our livelihoods if one crop fails. We believe that when our land is secure, it can promote sustainable land management practices in this area. We will be encouraged to do long-term investment if we have a protected land tenure system, which we believe enables us to carry on sustainable land management practices. When we have a secure land tenure system, it will improve our farming productivity; this will put us in a position to get financial support to increase our production. We believe Private tenure and the customary tenure systems can promote sustainable land management. With our land certificate, we can plant life crops that will take years to mature. By having our farming land secure, we can borrow money for our farm, which we can use to promote sustainable land management practices. Before than our parents could not invest on their own land because the government could reclaim their property at any time. Our land that we used to farm has been given to strangers for oil palm plantation and logging purposes. These strangers bribed our local chiefs to take the forest land that we get our living from. We inherited this forest land from our father, but the rules keep changing. Some agents from the government say we should not burn charcoal and set trip, but how do we feed our family if we cannot explore the forest? We use to get our living from the waterfall that God bless our forefathers with, but our chiefs and elders hold bribe and give it out to private people. We are fined for hunting to feed our families; we are arrested if caught collect firewood. We lost half of our coffee farm to a land grabber with fake documents. Now we farm intensively on the remaining plot, even though we know it’s damaging the soil, but we have no choice. The chief allocates land, but they do not know the demarcation of the land. The family’s fright over the plot of land for farming, and no one dares to plant trees because this land might be reassigned during the next season. The Land Rights Act recognizes customary rights, but investors bribe chiefs to sign for our lands. Now, the rivers we relied on for irrigation are polluted by dredging”.*

Conclusion

The study underscores the complex interplay between land tenure, local governance, and sustainable land management in Bong County, Liberia. The study highlights the interplay between land tenure insecurity, disputes, and low SLM adoption in Liberia. While local governance structures have potential, their effectiveness is hampered by transparency and capacity gaps. Customary land tenure dominates, but insecurity, lack of transparency, and weak institutional

capacity limit the potential for sustainable land management practices. Ensuring land tenure security, strengthening local institutions, and improving inclusive and transparency are critical for achieving sustainable land management goals. Addressing these challenges requires integrated reforms that combine tenure security, institutional strengthening, and community participation. Future research could explore the impact of specific interventions, such as participatory land use planning, on SLM outcomes.

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