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Social Appropriation of Institutional Land Reforms in a Context of Legal Pluralism: Perceptions and Representations of Rural Actors in the Communes of Nikki and Tchaourou (Benin)

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Abstract

This article examines how people in the communes of Nikki and Tchaourou perceive institutional land reforms, and what factors influence whether they adopt them. The study uses a mixed-methods approach: surveys of 160 rural households, semi-structured interviews with administrative and customary authorities and technical staff, focus groups, and field observations. Qualitative data were analyzed through content analysis, while quantitative data were processed with descriptive statistics and tests to compare perceptions across stakeholder groups. The findings show that people's views of land reforms depend a lot on how much information they have, their social status, and how much they trust institutions. While land tenure security tools are widely seen as useful for reducing conflicts and protecting customary rights, adoption is still low. This is due to the persistence of customary norms, limited information, complex procedures, and stronger trust in traditional authorities. Perceptions also differ by actor type and local context, showing that reforms are taken up in different ways. The study concludes that the success of land reforms depends not just on good laws, but also on how rural populations understand and represent them.

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Introduction

In Benin, several reforms have been introduced to modernize land governance, including the Rural Land Plan (PFR) and the adoption of the Land and Property Code. These measures aim to strengthen land security, formalize customary rights, and reduce conflicts over land access.

Despite these institutional advances, land practices are still largely shaped by customary authorities, local agreements, and informal rules. These continue to hold strong legitimacy among rural communities (Lavigne Delville, 2010; FAO, 2022). This reflects the persistence of pluralistic land governance, where state and

customary systems coexist, complement each other, and sometimes compete (Lavigne Delville, 2010). The municipalities of Nikki and Tchaourou are a clear example of this reality. Located in northeastern Benin, these areas have intense agricultural and pastoral activity, high population mobility, and growing pressure on land resources. Land tenure security challenges are made worse by diverse types of land tenure, the involvement of actors with different interests — farmers, herders, customary authorities, local governments, and decentralized state services — and the frequent occurrence of land disputes.

In this context, institutional reforms are expected to play a key role in preventing conflicts and securing

agricultural investments. However, their success largely depends on how affected populations perceive them. Understanding the perceptions and social representations of these actors is therefore essential to analyzing the conditions under which institutional land reforms are adopted.

This study examines the perceptions and social representations of institutional land reforms in the municipalities of Nikki and Tchaourou. Specifically, it seeks to identify the factors that shape these perceptions, understand how they influence the land security strategies of rural actors, and highlight their implications for local land governance.

Materials and Methods

Study Area

This study was conducted in the communes of Nikki and Tchaourou in the Borgou region of northern Benin. Nikki is located between 9°56' and 10°20' North latitude and 3°02' and 3°30' East longitude. Tchaourou lies between 8°40' and 9°45' North latitude and 1°55' and 3°11' East longitude. These two communes were selected because of their strategic importance for national land governance. They are strongly agro-pastoral, have expanding cultivated areas, high population mobility, and multiple actors are involved in accessing, using, and managing land.

In both municipalities, customary land institutions operate alongside mechanisms introduced by national land reforms, particularly the Land and Property Code and land tenure security tools. This makes them a highly relevant context for analyzing how socially appropriate reforms are in a setting marked by legal pluralism. The municipality of Nikki is one of the main agricultural and pastoral areas in northern Benin. The local economy is based mainly on family farming, with cereals, yams, cotton, and legumes as the key crops. Cattle breeding is also widespread, especially among Fulani and Bariba communities. Because agricultural and pastoral land is highly valuable, and because there are many ways to access land, conflicts often arise over inheritance, land sales, and farm boundaries.

The land system in Nikki is still largely governed by customary authorities, particularly land chiefs and village chiefs, who play a central role in allocating land and recognizing land rights. The strong legitimacy of these traditional institutions makes Nikki an important site for

studying how customary norms interact with formal land tenure security mechanisms.

The commune of Tchaourou is one of the largest communes in Benin and a key area for agricultural production and pastoral mobility. Its location at the crossroads of major transhumance routes connecting Benin with Burkina Faso, Niger, and Nigeria puts significant pressure on land and pastoral resources.

In both communes, agriculture and livestock are the main economic activities. The seasonal movement of transhumant herds, the expansion of farmland, and the diversification of land use make land tenure security and conflict management more challenging. In this context, land formalization mechanisms are expected to play a key role in preventing disputes. However, their implementation is still limited by persistent customary practices, diverse types of land tenure, and the coexistence of multiple regulatory systems.

Nikki and Tchaourou were chosen for several reasons. First, both municipalities face intense land-related issues due to the importance of agriculture and pastoralism. Second, they are areas where highly legitimate customary institutions coexist with modern land governance mechanisms, creating a clear context of legal pluralism that is well suited for studying how reforms are socially appropriated.

Finally, the diversity of actors present — indigenous and non-indigenous farmers, transhumant and sedentary herders, customary authorities, local governments, and state technical services — provides a strong basis for examining how perceptions, social representations, and trust in institutions influence the adoption of land reforms.

Sampling

This study used both qualitative and quantitative methods. These included focus group discussions with the target population and individual interviews with rights holders.

The sample size was calculated using Schwartz's (1994) formula:

$$n = z^2 p(1-p)/d^2$$

Where:

- "n" is the required sample size

- "z" is the value for the chosen confidence level. A 95% confidence level was used, corresponding to $z = 1.96$
- "p" is the expected proportion of the phenomenon. Since the prevalence was unknown, $p = 0.5$ was used, as recommended in methodological guidelines
- "d" is the desired level of precision. A margin of error of 10% was used, so $d = 0.1$

Based on this calculation, a total sample of 160 respondents was selected.

Respondents were drawn from districts in the two municipalities with the most significant land-related problems.

The stakeholder categories included:

- Land chiefs, village chiefs, and other traditional authorities
- Indigenous and non-indigenous farmers
- Rural youth (men and women) from indigenous lineages
- Members of village land management committees and administrative authorities

Table 1 presents the composition of the study sample.

Data Collected

The main data collected covered: the socio-economic characteristics of actors, characteristics of the land system and farms, level of knowledge of institutional land reforms, perceptions of land reforms, social representations of land reforms, level of social appropriation of the reforms, and the perceived effects of land reforms.

Data Analysis Methods

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including average perception scores. Comparative analyses were also conducted to examine differences between stakeholder categories and between the two municipalities. For this, Student's T-test was used to compare average perception scores, and the chi-square test was used to assess associations between respondent characteristics and their overall assessment of land reforms. Qualitative data were analyzed using content analysis.

Results and Discussion

Level of Knowledge of Land Reforms

Level of Knowledge of Institutional Reforms

Of the 160 respondents surveyed, only 17% said they had heard of the Rural Land Plan (PFR). Fewer than 10% were able to describe its objectives or main steps.

Knowledge of the Rural Land Certificate (CFR) and the Customary Land Tenure Attestation (ADC) was even lower. Many respondents confused these documents with other administrative papers such as clearance certificates, receipts, or sales agreements. Others associated them with tax procedures.

This lack of knowledge is particularly marked among women, who are rarely involved in community meetings or land negotiations. It is also evident among young people, who report that they were not "consulted," and among livestock farmers, who are often absent from awareness campaigns.

Sources of Information: Rumors, Community Relays, and NGOs

The main sources of information cited by respondents are community relays such as village chiefs and local notables, informal discussions, markets, and local radio stations. To a lesser extent, some information comes from NGOs or technicians who occasionally work in the villages.

However, these communication channels appear insufficient to ensure a clear and lasting understanding of land reforms. Awareness campaigns are often seen as sporadic, poorly explained, and not well adapted to the linguistic and cultural realities of rural populations. As a result, partial and sometimes contradictory information circulates, leading to inaccurate interpretations of land tenure systems.

"They talk about the Land Code on the radio, but nobody comes to explain how it works here." (Head of household, Tchaourou, January 2026)

This situation reveals a mismatch between institutional communication strategies and local socio-cultural realities. Awareness campaigns are often sporadic, lack interactivity, and are poorly adapted to the education levels of rural populations. As a result, the poor

understanding of the reforms contributes directly to mistrust of formal mechanisms, which are perceived as opaque, uncertain, and potentially risky.

Among respondents who had heard about the reform, information rarely came from institutional sources. Instead, it came through community intermediaries such as chiefs, village councilors, and notables; through rumors circulating in markets or during land disputes; and through occasional interventions by NGOs or land technicians, who were often seen as outsiders with only a temporary presence.

"One day, some people came with maps. They asked for the names of the fields. But after that, we didn't hear anything more." (Indigenous farmer, Tchaourou, 2025)

"The chief said we have to register the land. But some people say it's to collect taxes from us. So we're waiting." (Young person, Nikki, 2025)

The lack of continuous awareness campaigns, delivered in local languages and adapted to local culture, partly explains the uncertainty around the reforms. They are widely perceived as technical, distant, or even suspicious.

Social Representations of Land Reform

Beyond formal knowledge of land reforms, this section examines how rural populations in Nikki and Tchaourou perceive, interpret, and make sense of state-led land tenure security mechanisms. These social representations are more than just opinions. They reflect relationships to power, land, authority, and norms of legitimacy. They strongly influence whether reforms are accepted, appropriated, or rejected locally.

For most respondents, land reforms are not seen as an extension of local practices. Instead, they are viewed as an external initiative driven by the state or "white people," with little connection to local realities. Technical processes such as georeferencing, mapping, and issuing certificates are often interpreted as opaque, poorly understood, and sometimes suspicious.

"It's the people from Cotonou who come to decide. They fill out their paperwork, but here, we don't understand what difference it makes." (Notable, Tchaourou)

This perception creates both cognitive and social distance from the reform. It is widely seen as a matter for

the "state" or "elites," and of little relevance to ordinary rural populations.

Another common perception is that the reform does not protect people but exposes them to risk: the risk of losing land, paying taxes, or having their rights reinterpreted or challenged. This view is particularly strong among land chiefs, who fear losing their central role; among indigenous families, who worry that migrants will obtain documents; and among women, who fear being excluded from the registration process.

"If we give everyone papers, even those who came later will claim it as their land." (Lineage Chief, Nikki, January 2026)

"When you sign, you have to pay taxes afterward. And if you don't pay, they take the plot away. It's dangerous." (Woman, Tchaourou, January 2026)

These accounts express a widespread fear of legal dispossession. The very tools designed to secure rights are seen as instruments of exclusion, commodification, or fiscal control.

Several respondents also believed that land reforms benefit only a minority of local actors - chiefs, notables, and technical agents - who manipulate the rules to strengthen their position. Examples cited included priority access to documents, manipulation of information during land demarcation, and the exclusion of uninformed or marginalized villagers.

"When they measured the land, they put the names of their friends on it. We didn't get anything." (Young man, Nikki, January 2026)

This representation reinforces mistrust of registration processes, which are perceived as biased and opaque.

Overall Level of Perception of Land Reforms

The analysis shows an overall low level of positive perception of land reforms. The average overall perception score is 37.1%, indicating a generally negative assessment of institutional land tenure security mechanisms.

This means that fewer than 4 out of 10 respondents expressed a favorable or somewhat positive view of the reforms, despite their implementation in rural areas for several years.

This low level of social support highlights a clear gap between the institutional logic of the reform and local social realities. Detailed scores by dimension are presented in Table 3.

Table 16 presents the average overall perception scores for institutional land reforms in the municipalities of Nikki and Tchaourou. Scores are expressed as percentages and were calculated by aggregating respondents' answers across four analytical dimensions. A score below 50% indicates an overall negative or mixed perception of the reforms.

An examination of the table shows that all four dimensions scored below the 50% threshold, confirming the hypothesis of weak social appropriation of the land reforms.

The most critical dimension is costs and complexity of procedures, with a score of 29.7%. This reflects a very negative perception. For many respondents, land reforms appear technically complex, financially burdensome, and disconnected from their daily land practices.

Even to do the ADC, they ask a lot of you. The farmer doesn't have that kind of time. But before, there weren't these kinds of difficulties (Farmer, non-native, Atacora origin, Nikki, January 2026)

This comment shows that the negative perception does not come from an ideological rejection of the law. It comes from discouraging practical experiences that reinforce the continued use of customary rules.

Understanding of land reforms scored 38.5%, meaning fewer than 4 out of 10 respondents have a sufficient understanding of land tenure systems. Trust in land institutions, at 34.1%, is also low. This reflects a significant disconnect between rural populations and the land administration.

"If you start with the paperwork, you could end up in court..." (Village notable, Nikki, January 2026)

This fear reinforces the perception of formalization as a potential source of conflict, rather than as a tool for land conflict resolution.

Only the dimension on perceived effects on land tenure security came close to the average, with 46.2%. However, it still did not reach the threshold for positive perception.

This result reflects a deep ambivalence. Reforms are seen both as potential solutions and as sources of new risks.

Overall, these findings suggest that for rural populations, land reforms are not viewed as a clear tool for securing land tenure. Instead, they are seen as complex, inaccessible, and socially distant mechanisms.

Faced with the constraints of formal procedures, rural populations continue to rely on customary regulations, which are perceived as more accessible, faster, and socially legitimate. This choice does not reflect outright opposition to the state, but rather an adaptation strategy in the context of land tenure uncertainty.

Thus, the low positive perception of the reforms (37.1%) does not mean there is no need for security. It reflects a mismatch between the institutional offer and local social expectations.

Comparison of Indigenous and Non-Indigenous Populations: A Structural Divergence in Perceptions

The comparison of average perception scores between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Populations highlights significant differences across all dimensions analyzed (Table 20).

Table 20 presents the average perception scores for land reforms according to respondents' origin status. Scores are expressed as percentages and show clear differences between native and non-native populations, especially regarding the perceived effects of reforms on land tenure security.

The student's t-test applied to the overall perception score shows a statistically significant difference between native and non-native populations ($t = 2.14$; $p = 0.034$). This allows us to reject the hypothesis of equal perceptions between the two groups and confirms a structural divergence in how land reforms are represented.

Native populations had a slightly higher overall score (38.9%) than non-native populations (35.8%), reflecting a somewhat less negative overall perception. However, this masks a strong symbolic resistance to land reforms. Indigenous people perceive the reforms as a potential threat to ancestral rights and customary land tenure. The relatively low score for the effects of reforms on land tenure security (39.5%) reflects this fear of a challenge to customary legitimacy.

In contrast, non-native farmers gave a significantly higher score (55.4%) to the effects of the reforms, reflecting strong expectations of legal formalization.

"For us, paperwork can save us." (Non-native farmer, Tchaourou, January 2026)

This divergence reflects a structural asymmetry in land tenure. Native farmers rely on social security through customary recognition, while non-native farmers seek legal security due to their land vulnerability.

Formalization Perceived as Socially Discriminatory

The combination of financial, administrative, and social costs reinforces the idea that land formalization is reserved for a privileged minority. Respondents often associate access to land titles and official documents with local elites who have economic, political, or social connections.

"...and if you don't have enough financial resources, even if you're right, you're going to lose. For example, if you're disputing land with a local official, you know that if it goes to court, you'll lose immediately." (Village notable, Nikki, January 2026)

This view aligns with the low score of 29.7% on costs and complexity, which reflects structural mistrust of institutional mechanisms. For many rural stakeholders, land formalization appears less as an accessible right and more as an uncertain, socially risky, and potentially exclusionary process.

In this context, reliance on customary regulations emerges as a pragmatic alternative. It is perceived as more flexible, less costly, and better rooted in local social relations.

Perceived Effects of Reforms on Land Tenure Security

Positive Perceptions: Security, Protection, and Investment

Some respondents acknowledged that land reforms can help reduce land conflicts, clarify property and use rights, protect heirs during intergenerational transfer, and secure long-term agricultural investments.

These positive views were more common among respondents facing high land insecurity or who had

experienced land disputes. They were also stronger among non-native residents, for whom formalization is seen as a path to legal recognition.

"For us, paper can save us..." (Non-native farmer, Tchaourou, 2026)

Recognition of these potential benefits helps explain the relatively higher score of 46.2% for this dimension, compared to others in the perception index.

Negative Perceptions: Conflicts, Challenges to Customary Rights, and Commodification

At the same time, many respondents expressed concerns about the negative effects of land reforms. These include challenges to historically recognized customary rights, the emergence of intra-family conflicts, especially between brothers or lineages, the legalization of land disputes, and the growing commodification of agricultural land.

"Paper can protect, but it can also create problems between brothers..." (Village Chief, Tchaourou, 2026)

These negative perceptions limit support for formal mechanisms, despite recognition of their potential advantages. They illustrate the clash between two systems of land legitimacy: customary law, based on social recognition, and state law, based on legal texts.

Comparative Analysis by Status of Origin

To complement the comparative analysis of perceptions, a chi-square (χ^2) test was conducted to examine the existence of an association between the respondents' status of origin (native or non-native) and their overall assessment of land reforms.

The results of the chi-square test in Table 22 show a statistically significant association between origin status and overall assessment of land reforms ($\chi^2 = 11.82$; $p = 0.003$). This indicates that perceptions of the reforms are not randomly distributed across different social groups.

Indigenous people expressed a proportionally higher number of negative assessments, while non-indigenous people were relatively more favorable toward land formalization mechanisms.

This difference is largely explained by the distinct land tenure positions held by these two groups.

Indigenous people generally benefit from social recognition of their land rights through customary institutions. They may therefore view the reforms as a potential challenge to their historical authority over land. In contrast, non-native people, whose rights are often less secure under customary systems, see land formalization as an opportunity to strengthen their legal security.

"Our parents left us this land a long time ago. If everything has to go through paperwork tomorrow, we don't know what will become of it." (Indigenous household head, Nikki, January 2026)

This statement reflects the attachment of Indigenous populations to customary land tenure systems. It also highlights mistrust of administrative procedures seen as likely to weaken ancestral rights. This helps explain the relatively high frequency of negative opinions among Indigenous people.

Trust in Land Institutions

An Overall Low Level of Institutional Trust

Trust in land institutions is a key factor in the adoption of reforms. However, the results show an overall low level of trust, with an average score of 34.1% (Table 16).

This means that less than one-third of respondents express genuine trust in the institutions responsible for land management.

This low level of trust reflects a structural distance between rural populations and the land administration, which is perceived as remote, inaccessible, and sometimes biased.

Negative Perceptions of Public Institutions

Public land institutions, municipalities, technical services, and courts are often perceived as:

- geographically and socially distant;
- difficult to understand in terms of procedures;
- costly in terms of time and resources;
- and sometimes characterized by favoritism.

"At the chief's house, we can still talk. At the town hall, money talks." (Member of a conciliation committee, Nikki, January 2026)

These perceptions help explain the low institutional trust score of 34.1%.

The Continued Legitimacy of Customary Authorities

Unlike public institutions, customary authorities continue to enjoy strong social legitimacy. They are seen as more accessible, closer to the people, and better able to manage land conflicts daily.

This customary legitimacy persists despite recognition of the legal limitations of these authorities. It illustrates the strength of social regulations in local land governance.

The results show that the social appropriation of institutional land reforms in the municipalities of Nikki and Tchaourou remains limited, despite efforts by the Beninese state to modernize land governance. This limited appropriation is explained less by the existence of legal mechanisms than by a lack of information, negative social perceptions of the reforms, and low levels of trust in public institutions.

These findings confirm that the effectiveness of land policies depends as much on their social acceptability as on their legal content.

The limited understanding of land mechanisms supports Rogers' (2003) analysis of the diffusion of innovations, which argues that the adoption of a reform depends on whether target populations understand it. It also aligns with the work of Lavigne Delville (2010; 2020), who shows that land reforms in West Africa are often hindered by poor information dissemination and awareness-raising strategies that are poorly adapted to local realities.

In the municipalities studied, information circulates mainly through community networks and informal exchanges. This favors rumors and misinterpretations of land tenure systems.

The results also highlight the central role of social representations in how reforms are appropriated. Land tenure security mechanisms are frequently perceived as tools of administrative control, taxation, or challenges to customary rights. This observation is consistent with Moscovici's (1961) theory of social representations, which argues that actors' behavior is largely shaped by the meanings they assign to institutions.

Table.1 Study Sample

	District	Villages	Number
Tchaourou	Sanson	Sébou	24
		Barerou	21
	Tchatchou	Gararou	20
	Kika	Kika	24
Nikki	Tasso	Tasso	19
	Ouénou	Ouénou	29
	Biro	Ourarou	23
Total			160

Table.2 Reported Knowledge Rate of Main Land Mechanisms

Dispositif foncier	% of respondents who have Heard of	% able to explain its meaning
Cadastral Map (PFR)	17%	9%
Customary Land tenure certificate (ADC)	12%	6%
Rural Land certificate (CFR)	8%	3%
Land and state property code (2013)	5%	1%

Source: Field survey results, December 2025

Table.3 Average Overall Perception Scores of Land Reforms (%)

Dimensions analyzed	Average score (%)	Appreciation level
Understanding of Land reforms	38.5	Negative
Cost and complexity of procedures	29.7	Very negative
Effets perçus sur la sécurité foncière	46.2	Mixed
Perceived impact on institutions	34.1	Negative
Overall perception Score	37.1	Negative

Source: Field survey results, December 2026

Table.4 Average Perception Scores of Land Reforms According to Status of Origin (%)

Dimensions	Indigenous people (%)	Non-indigenous people (%)
Comprehension	41.8	32.6
Cost and complexity	33.9	24.1
Impact on Land tenure security	39.5	55.4
Institutional confidence	36.2	31.4
Global score	38.9	35.8

Source: Field survey results, December 2026

Table.5 Distribution of Respondents by Status of Origin and Overall Assessment of Land Reforms

Reform Appreciation	Indigenous people	No-indigenous people	Total
Positive	24	32	56
Mixed	19	11	30
Negative	54	20	74
Total	97	63	160
Results of khi2	$\chi^2 = 11.82$; ddl = 2 ; p = 0.003		

Source: Field survey results, December 2026

This helps explain why reforms are viewed differently by native and non-native populations: native populations fear a challenge to their customary rights, while non-native populations see legal formalization to strengthen the security of their rights.

Furthermore, this study shows that legal pluralism leads more to complementarity than opposition between customary and administrative institutions. Populations draw on both systems to secure their land rights. This aligns with the analyses of Lund (2006), Meinzen-Dick and Pradhan (2002), and Ostrom (1990) on the coexistence of institutions in resource governance. The continued trust in customary authorities reflects their strong social legitimacy, while public institutions are still often perceived as complex, costly, and detached from local realities.

In conclusion, this study shows that the appropriation of land reforms is a social process shaped by the interplay between information, social representations, institutional trust, and legal pluralism. It highlights that the success of land policies depends not only on appropriate legal reforms, but also on awareness-raising, participatory mechanisms, and governance arrangements that closely involve both customary authorities and public institutions. This approach is essential for strengthening the legitimacy of reforms and sustainably improving land tenure security in rural areas.

The findings from Nikki and Tchaourou confirm that land tenure security is primarily perceived and experienced as a social construct, rather than simply as the product of legal formalization. Although institutional reforms are recognized in principle, they struggle to establish themselves as legitimate and accessible tools for securing land tenure.

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