

Credibility of Formalization

A Renewed Attempt at Forest Titling in Southwest China

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Title: *Credibility of Formalization: A Renewed Attempt at Forest Titling in Southwest China*



Formalization has regained popularity in development discourses. Also in China significant efforts of titling are witnessed in the forestry sector. Although initial efforts date back nearly four decades ago, since 2008 a renewed attempt under the Collective Forest Tenure Reform (CFTR) has been introduced. This paper examines whether this instance has contributed to a more credible institutional arrangement of forest tenure. To assess how the reform's formal objectives are aligned with local state capacities and interests, as well as with farmers' needs and preferences, it applies the Formal, Actual, Targeted (FAT) institutional framework. Primary data are drawn from a survey (N= 331) in the Wuling Mountain Area (covering four provinces of Southwest China), accompanied by 30 semi-structured interviews with local officials and village cadres. Findings suggest that the reform initially appears credible, as the title is issued and deemed important by both farmers and authorities. However, variation in the implementation and outcomes of the reform have pointed to an institutional compromise that is manifested through nonconforming practices and negligence of local factors. Likened to previous rounds of forest reform, the most recent instance failed to address long-standing issues immanent to China's forest tenure. The forest certificates have emerged as an 'empty' institution, and future changes in the use and value of forest could easily dampen the reform's efforts and credibility. These findings suggest that caution should be exercised before introducing a land titling program and point to a need for more context-specific approaches to formalization.