

Ensuring Homestead Land Rights through Community Mobilization and Advocacy

Many governments guarantee their citizens entitlements—provisions that improve living standards by ensuring access to basic needs. Yet resource constraints, clientelism, capture, and corruption—among other administrative and political ills—routinely render even well-designed entitlement programs ineffective. A key task for development practitioners is to help build the capacity and accountability necessary to deliver entitlements effectively and equitably. What role, if any, can village-level community mobilization play in improving entitlement delivery?

This project seeks to contribute to a growing body of research concerned with this question through a randomized, mixed-methods evaluation of a homestead land titling program in Bihar, India. Bihar state law guarantees all otherwise landless rural households the right to hold title to a homestead plot, a small piece of land on which the household's dwelling is built. In most cases, this means gaining title for the plot on which the household already lives; where this is not possible, law requires the government to provide the household with an alternative plot. Yet, a large share of poor households—especially those belonging to the Scheduled Castes (SCs), Bihar's most marginalized social category—do not hold title to the homestead land on which they live.

The Program

Deshkal Society, a civil society organization (CSO) specializing in research, advocacy, and grassroots interventions, has initiated a program to confront widespread lack of homestead title. The intervention is centered on the formation of village-level community-based organizations (CBOs). Deshkal Society's field coordinators visit program villages, survey SC households on their land status, and hold community meetings.

During these meetings, the coordinators inform villagers of their rights to a homestead title and the potential benefits of gaining title. Then, assuming interest from the community, field coordinators assist villagers in forming CBOs of around 20 members, split roughly evenly between men and women. The CBOs identify all SC households in the village lacking title and assist these households in preparing applications. They also follow up with local government officials and, when necessary, lead the community in applying pressure for the fair and efficient review of homestead applications.

Potential Benefits of Homestead Title

Why is it important for households to possess title to their homestead land? Initial interviews and literature reviews generated the following potential mechanisms through which gaining title could improve the living standards of a household. Obtaining homestead title may:

- Provide the household with a sense of dignity and identity

In rural Bihar, land is central to social status. Holding a land title, even if only to a small homestead plot, could make households feel more empowered as legitimate members of their communities.

- Protect the household from loss of assets if dispossession occurs

Households may be forced to move if their homestead stands in the way of a government-sponsored project (e.g., road expansion), or if dwellings are destroyed by a flood or other natural disaster. In such cases, a household's asset base can be wiped out. With a title, the household can claim an alternative homestead site and compensation for assets lost.

- Incentivize investment in dwelling improvements or livelihood activities on the homestead land

Households may be reluctant to invest in repairs and improvements that make their dwelling safer and more habitable if they are afraid that they might lose the homestead plot. The same may also be the case for pursuing livelihood activities, like growing supplemental vegetables or raising livestock.

- Improve the household's bargaining power

If a household lives on the land of its employer, or if an employer is seen to be politically powerful, household members may accept work at wages lower than they otherwise would to avoid risking eviction.

- Encourage take-up of other government services

Some government entitlements require that recipients hold a homestead title for eligibility. Furthermore, positive exposure to local government through title attainment may increase a household's motivation and ability to access other services.

Potential Barriers to Homestead Titling

If homestead titles are potentially useful and are guaranteed to all otherwise landless households, why are so many SC households untitled? Initial interviews and literature reviews suggested the following barriers to obtaining title:

- Lack of information

Although laws guaranteeing homestead rights have been on the books since independence, related information is not propagated in any systematic way, so households may not even be aware of this right.

- Lack of resources

Applying for homestead is an arduous process that involves a great deal of paperwork, which in turn requires literacy and access to time and information.

- Bureaucratic bottlenecks

Even if a household submits an application, bureaucrats may be overextended and lack the time or incentives to process the application. If there is any uncertainty surrounding the decisions, risk-averse bureaucrats may pass on paperwork to superiors, causing extended or even permanent delays.

- Elite capture

Local elites who benefit from poor households' land insecurity may pressure or bribe government officials not to grant title.

Protecting Land Rights through Community-Based Mobilization and Advocacy

Deshkal Society's program seeks to help each village in which it operates to create a platform for community mobilization. Beyond facilitating attainment of title, CBOs may improve land security directly by constituting an organized lobby representing the village's SC community. CBOs may also support households in obtaining other entitlements, for instance wage labor through India's right-to-work program. As social movement theorists have long argued, the ability to act collectively is one of the few resources at the disposal of poor and marginalized communities.

Yet, improving the delivery of entitlements in a capacity-constrained setting is an uphill struggle. Existing research has found that externally-induced civic participation often fails to take root, and Bihar is infamous for its purportedly oppressive economic elite and under-resourced bureaucracy. Can CBOs take root and improve the living standards of local SC households and, if so, through what channels does the process work? If not, what impedes prevent Deshkal

Society's theory of change from coming to fruition? In attempting to address these questions, this study aims to contribute actionable insights for CSOs and donors working in Bihar, the Bihar state government, and development practitioners across the globe seeking to leverage mobilization and advocacy to improve the delivery of crucial entitlements.