The dynamics of property and other mechanisms of access: The case of charcoal production and trade in Ghana

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An analysis of the dynamics of access to resources is important for a fuller understanding of rural livelihoods especially with changing times and technology. We use benefits from charcoal production and trade in 10 communities in the forest savanna transition zone of Ghana as a case to explore the dynamics of access in time and space and the mechanisms various social actors apply in order to benefit. We apply an analytical framework that combines the revised property rights framework of Sikor et al. (2017) with “A Theory of Access” by Ribot and Peluso (2003). Participatory rural appraisal methods, stakeholder meetings, document reviews and interviews were conducted with social actors along the charcoal commodity chain. We show that the ability to benefit from charcoal is more dependent on property than other mechanisms of access, and both customary and statutory institutions are involved in mediating access to charcoal in the area. Access to trees used for producing charcoal is however, largely informal in Ghana. The realization of economic benefits of charcoal have led to a contestation between chiefs and family heads over rights to trees in some communities and changes in the mode of payment for trees used in producing it. Our findings suggest that both customary and statutory institutions do not currently ensure the sustainability of trees used for producing charcoal, their interests lie in taxation. Scarcity and concern over sustainability of trees have led the state to initiate plans to formalize the charcoal sector. Chiefs have strengthened their authority in charcoal-producing communities and the low presence of statutory institutions with de jure mandate to regulate the charcoal sector in those communities has implication on plans by the state to formalize and regularize charcoal production and trade in the country. We envisage four adverse effects from the government’s attempt to formalize the charcoal sector – elite capture, exclusion of vulnerable and marginalized people, criminalization of livelihoods and loss of rights. We recommend that the planned formalization by should be devoid of directives that would make charcoal production and trade prohibitive for low-income households.