



Africa Land Policy Note Series

Note 4. Lessons Learned from Land Administration Operations in Africa

As Sub-Saharan Africa deals with multiple challenges, including land use conflicts, rapid and often unplanned urbanization, and climate change, **there is a need to understand how improved tenure security and land administration can support governments to respond.** This series of four Land Policy Notes covers key topics for the region—customary tenure, women’s land rights, and urban land governance. The fourth note provides an overview of lessons learned from the World Bank’s recent land administration operations in Sub-Saharan Africa. Together, these notes provide an overview of existing constraints and challenges, as well as options and solutions based on operational evidence and good practice. These notes are meant to be distributed widely to World Bank staff, clients, and other partners and to inform country dialogue.

Summary

- The Africa region is characterized by low levels of formally documented land rights, overlapping customary and formal institutions for managing land, and high rates of tenure insecurity, which contribute to many of the major challenges facing the region.
- Improving land administration in Africa requires evidence-based policy, legal, and regulatory reforms designed, piloted, and implemented through multistakeholder participation, as well as institutional reforms to clarify and streamline mandates and training to strengthen capacity.
- Land sector reforms require time, sustained investment, and high-level political commitment but ultimately result in substantial transformational impacts, including increased land revenues, land productivity, social cohesion, gender equality, and more sustainable land management.

1. Introduction

Land tenure systems in Sub-Saharan Africa are evolving, as customary systems with rights derived largely from group membership and confirmed orally are increasingly interacting with formal and informal land markets and formal government systems. Some land transactions involve formal government institutions, while most happen outside government regulation. The expansion of land transactions with outsiders not part of the customary systems that have historically governed land access and administration calls

into question the continued reliance on oral land administration systems. There are also some groups (such as women, youth, migrants) whose access and rights to land have not always been well protected by customary systems. For example, 48 percent of women in Sub-Saharan Africa fear land loss due to divorce or spousal death, compared to 34 percent of men (Prindex 2022). While some governments have attempted to formally recognize customary land rights, rates of land registration and recorded transfers remain very low compared to other regions, in

part due to cumbersome, expensive procedures reliant on outdated technologies. As a result, the region is characterized by low levels of formally documented land rights, overlapping customary and formal institutions for managing land, and high rates of tenure insecurity compared to others: 26 percent of people fear losing their land rights in Sub-Saharan Africa, second only to the Middle East and North Africa region (28 percent) (Prindex 2022).

The lack of formally recognized and registered public and private (including customary) land rights contributes to the major challenges facing the region:

- **Low domestic revenue mobilization:** The lack of updated records of land rights undermines domestic revenue mobilization by making it difficult to identify taxpayers.
- **Fragility:** Land disputes are both a driver and consequence of protracted conflicts in the region. It is difficult to resolve the land disputes overloading many courts without written records. Ongoing migration (both forced and voluntary) will further strain weak land administration systems in the absence of systems to formally recognize and record land rights. Without intervention, interpersonal land conflicts can spillover into intercommunal violence.
- **Limited infrastructure development:** Access to land for public investments is complicated by high rates of unrecorded land rights, making it difficult to identify unencumbered land. Where governments exercise eminent domain, protracted compensation-related grievances often follow due to an inability to identify legitimate landholders affected by involuntary land takings.

- **Unsustainable resource use:** Farmers have an incentive to deforest land and farm continuously (without fallowing) until the natural resources are depleted to prove and protect their land rights. The lack of registered farmland rights and unclear protected area boundaries also hamper the development of traceable, sustainable agricultural value chains.
- **Low private sector investment:** Legitimate investors are deterred by unclear land rights, and landholders without recorded rights cannot mobilize land (often their main asset) for financing.
- **Gender inequality:** Women have less access to land and less secure land rights than men in many customary systems, and government institutions are insufficiently gender-sensitive, which contribute to persistent gender gaps in land access and agricultural productivity.
- **Climate change vulnerability:** Outdated boundary and rights data undermine land use planning and disaster response, limiting benefit-sharing under carbon finance programs. Unregulated land markets allow encroachment in at-risk areas.
- **Loss of public land:** Unregulated markets undermine the good governance of public land assets.

Formal recognition and registration of land rights and transactions is thus critical to the achievement of sustainable and inclusive development in the Africa region. The remainder of this policy note outlines key lessons learned on how to improve land administration in the Africa region.

2. Lessons Learned from Recent Land Operations

Policy, legal, and regulatory reforms are needed to enable improved land administration. Many land laws, regulations, and institutions date to the colonial or post-Independence era and are no longer suited to respond to current needs. Reforms are needed to increase transparency, improve service delivery, and reduce the cost of formal land administration, including by allowing the use of fit-for-purpose technologies. Given the sector's

political sensitivity, these reforms need to begin with an inclusive, evidence-based policy dialogue that builds consensus among all stakeholders (including customary authorities), accompanied by pilots of new procedures and technologies to demonstrate value, build trust, and inform course correction.

Qualified, formally recognized land institutions with clear mandates, a customer

service orientation, and written records are critical to implement new laws and procedures. Where institutional mandates are dispersed and/or overlapping, or where existing institutions are unwilling or unable to adapt, it may be necessary to build new, independent land institutions to streamline service delivery, as in Benin, Cabo Verde, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Liberia, and Sierra Leone. Decentralizing land administration institutions also makes them more accessible to landholders, increasing the likelihood they will register land transactions.

First-time land registration campaigns must be systematic, incorporate additional protections for vulnerable groups, and be implemented as part of fiscally sustainable ongoing land administration. Systematic approaches where all rights within a given area are proactively registered through community-based adjudication (rights confirmation) are more inclusive and cost-effective than sporadic (on-demand) approaches, which tend to benefit well-connected landholders. It is critical to include targeted communications to and representation of vulnerable groups (such as women, pastoralists, minorities) in the rights adjudication and registration process to protect if not strengthen their land rights. In addition to registering land ownership rights, some countries are experimenting with formal recording of existing informal land use rights, such as the various forms of rural land use tenancy practiced throughout West Africa. For example, Côte d'Ivoire recently introduced formal land use contracts to legally record the customary rural land tenancies that underpin much of the country's cash crop production, thereby unlocking rural land registration efforts that had stalled for decades due to inter-communal tensions over tenants' inability to legally record their rights (World Bank 2024). Although Ethiopia and Rwanda have made good progress with first-time registration, their experience highlights the need to reduce transaction registration costs and develop sustainable business models for ongoing administration.

Land registration and ongoing land administration need to leverage cost-effective digital technologies and fit-for-purpose procedures to facilitate registration of subsequent transactions. Governments should

invest in building simple digital land information systems (LIS) that can work offline, with data uploaded to cloud-based servers for service continuity when internet connectivity is available. Land administration procedures should leverage mobile devices and software applications for digital field data capture and free high-resolution ortho-imagery supplemented by commercial imagery. Governments should prioritize open source and commercial applications that can be customized over wholly custom-made software.

Investments are needed in land administration training programs. Given the paucity of dedicated land sector education institutions globally, land operations should include training programs to develop the qualified human resources needed to implement land administration reforms at scale, including in surveying, geomatics, information technology, land law, and social sciences. Training programs need to not only disseminate new reforms and technologies but also develop the capacity for further innovations to respond to evolving needs.

Land sector reforms require time, sustained investment, and high-level political commitment. Policy reforms can take years (with high-level political commitment, a clear land policy vision, and dedicated funding for research, dialogue, and piloting) or even decades (without such support) to adopt. Completion of nationwide first-time land registration through a national land tenure program typically requires at least ten to fifteen years and significant investment after reforms are adopted, with careful attention to inclusivity in design and implementation. Land sector reforms thus require sustained investment over a long period of time, often spanning multiple administrations and well beyond the typical five-year implementation period of externally financed operations. Governments need dedicated partners that are committed to support them throughout this process, from upstream (and ongoing) policy dialogue to investment implementation.

Investing in land sector reforms that are inclusive, evidence-based, and participatory reduces inherent risks. To be successful, land sector reforms must be inclusive of all stakeholders, especially those who may feel

threatened by the proposed reforms. Facilitating multistakeholder participation through broad citizen engagement and targeted communications with various groups is thus crucial at all stages of land sector reform, from policy analysis and reform through piloting and implementation. Critical analysis of existing policies, proposed reforms, and pilot experiences is equally important, as demonstrated by Rwanda's recognition of the rights of customary spouses in its national land registration program, following pilot evaluation results showing that mostly the rights of legally married spouses were registered (Ali, Deininger, and Goldstein 2011).

A recent review of the World Bank's Africa land administration portfolio over the past decade found that two-thirds of closed projects rated above the acceptable level of performance (Shiferaw and Karamete 2021). Significantly, the review found that complex land policy and regulatory reforms are best addressed through stand-alone land operations led by land administration specialists with the requisite technical and political economy skills. Improved land administration based on documented land rights de-risks investments in

other sectors. Operations that do not include land sector investments led by qualified specialists are the highest risk.

Strengthening land administration has substantial transformational impacts. In Ethiopia, farmland registration increased tax revenues by 15 percent to 67 percent, and farmers have accessed US\$85 million in microfinance loans using their land records (World Bank 2023). First-time land registration also increased land productivity by 45 percent in Ethiopia (Holden, Deininger, and Ghebru 2009); increased farmers' investment in perennial cash crops and trees in Benin by 40 percent (Goldstein et al. 2015); and reduced land conflicts by 56 percent in Burkina Faso (96 percent for serious conflicts) (Linkow 2018). ; Moreover, women farmers who benefited from land registration invested more in agricultural production on distant plots rather than guarding their rights in Benin (Goldstein et al. 2015) and accessed additional land in Ethiopia (Persha et al. 2017). Farmers in Niger reforested 5 million hectares after their rights to manage and benefit from on-farm trees were recognized (Stickler 2012)

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