

What is Land Administration? Exploring an inclusive definition

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SUMMARY

Land administration is the concept that is commonly used for systems, processes and structures that humans deploy to manage the earth's resources locally, regionally, nationally and globally. This paper is a critique of existing land administration understandings, definitions and principles derived therefrom. Several definitions of land administration have evolved over the past decades. We interrogate the usefulness and appropriateness of these definitions in the light of developments in the Global South where the dominance of concepts imported from the Global North do not always find resonance. We draw on established literature, a series of workshops on land administration conducted in 2019, and inputs from members of the International Federation of Surveyors (FIG) Land Administration Education Working Group to examine the applicability of current definitions of land administration. We argue that the models put forward for land administration in the Global South are challenged by customary land management systems that struggle to conform to the normative framework of imported systems. We argue that the way we conceptualise land administration through definitions and modelling materially affects its fitness for purpose in many socio-political contexts, even where 'fit-for-purpose' Land Administration is proposed. This is because the conditions on the ground and why they cannot adapt are generally poorly understood. We propose a thorough review of how land administration is named, defined, understood and used around the world, and suggest potential modifications or changes to maintain its relevance nationally and internationally.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Some authors suggest that, through improved land use management and by ensuring land tenure security, rural poor people are incentivised to make wise and meaningful investments that can contribute to food security (Rockson *et al.* 2013) and make gains towards lifting themselves out of poverty (Nkonya *et al.* 2008). Indigenous communities can address challenges related to climate change, land degradation and food security through improved stewarding of natural resources (Selemani 2020). In urban and peri-urban areas, effective, responsible, and sustainable land administration can help to contain urban sprawl while ensuring that inhabitants have access to basic services (Bennett and Alemie 2016) and land tenure security.

There have, however, been some disappointing results of land administration interventions where the claims have not met expectations. The primary drivers for such interventions have been the formal recognition of rights in land, and the provision of a means of trading these rights (Burns *et al.* 2006, 2023). But the constraints of conventional forms of land administration are seldom interrogated, particularly in the Global South. Often the assumptions about its beneficial value are taken for granted.

In this paper we reflect on the adaptations that land administration has made in the past with the view to suggesting further adaptations to current definitions to increase the relevance and efficacy of rigorous land administration systems and structures across the globe.

2. METHODOLOGY

The interrogation of terms and phrases is guided by employing the ANSI/NISO (2010) guidelines. These were used by Çağdaş & Stubkjær in the construction of their Cadastre and Land Administration Thesaurus (CaLAtHe) (Çağdaş and Stubkjær 2015). The Guidelines specify steps as 1) term selection, 2) identification of semantic relationships, and 3) specification of these relationships. This paper focuses on steps 1 and 2, with step 3 forthcoming.

Step 1 is performed using the committee method and the empirical method. The committee method relies on domain experts sharing their knowledge about terms and their relationships. The empirical method relies on review of published documents. Three workshops were held in November 2019 in Pietermaritzburg, East London, and Cape Town (South Africa) respectively. There were 10 participants at the first workshop, 11 at the second, and 19 at the third. Participants represented government departments (local and national), academia, non-government organisations, and professional bodies. The workshops began with discussions about the definitions of land administration, land management, and land governance, followed by identifying the challenges associated with these, drawing on participants' experiences.

Additionally, in July and August 2023, members of the FIG working group on land administration education were asked for their input into what land administration means. Five responses were received. For the empirical method, we reviewed the evolution of definitions of land administration from the 1980s to today.

The data collected was collated to identify various themes in accordance with step 2 of the ANSI/NISO Guidelines. We present a critical review of the definitions of land administration using a Global South lens that is sensitive to inequalities and the needs of the poor to land and land-based resources, especially in developing countries. We are also cognisant of power relations and the lasting effects of colonialism/imperialism on land administration.

3. RESULTS

The empirical method revealed an evolution of definitions of land administration hinging on the UNECE's (1996) definition. Modifications were made by Williamson et al. (2010) and in the Land Administration Domain Model (LADM) ISO standard (ISO 2012). These changes see a shift from a focus on information management pertaining to land rights, to information management pertaining to land and natural resource management, to information management pertaining to the relationship between people and land. Hull, Kingwill and Fokane (2020) embrace the LADM definition (ISO 2012) and add that, at the most basic level, land administration can be conceived of as the operational component of land governance in pursuance of national land policy goals, plans and strategies. This consideration brings both land *governance* and land *policy* into focus, echoing the early conception of Dale and McLaughlin (1988). The FAO (2002) conceived of land administration as the application of the rules of land tenure, while the Framework for Effective Land Administration (FELA) (UN-GGIM 2019) echoes this relational attribution that links people, policies and places.

For the committee method, respondents suggested a move away from existing terms, including cadastre, because of the associations these carry. For a new understanding and a broader scope, a shift in thinking and a new lexicon may need to be developed. Hence, it was cautioned that land administration should not be conceived in terms of land tenure, land information, or the cadastre alone. Conceptions of land administration along these lines limit our understanding of its breadth and depth.

Delivering effective land administration involves multiple components of government, and possibly civil society organisations, traditional authorities, and even supranational organisations. The conception of land administration should transcend the formal/informal continuum of land tenure and should apply equally to both the 'visible' / formal and 'invisible' / off-register systems of land-based rights and interests. At a national level it should include all areas and volumes within state sovereignty; at an international level it should include global Earth-based resources for effective stewardship in line with sustainable human development and effective system management.

4. CONCLUSION

We reflect initial exploration that should lead to a definition of land administration that is fit for our purposes today and in the near future. A new definition will reflect these progressive understandings and challenge conservative schools of thought. It should incorporate the needs of the Global South in balance with those of the Global North, be intentionally international, should challenge assumed values of land administration, should be inclusive of contexts of legal pluralism, multicultural societal attitudes and practices, and customary forms of land administration. Current conceptual understandings of land administration have advanced beyond the existing specific definitions, while existing high level definitions are open to misinterpretation. The time is ripe for further development towards a definition of land administration suitable for our time.

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