

Bridging the municipal-traditional authority divide: towards a consolidated land information system in South Africa's former homelands

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Key words: Land management; customary land administration; municipal-traditional authority nexus; land tenure security; fit-for-purpose land administration; integrated land governance

SUMMARY

This paper investigates the complex interface between statutory and customary land administration systems in South Africa, focusing on the municipal–traditional authority nexus in two former homelands: Jozini Local Municipality in KwaZulu-Natal and Thulamela and Collins Chabane Local Municipalities in Limpopo Province. The study responds to the persistent fragmentation and inefficiencies in South Africa's land administration landscape, where overlapping governance structures and legal ambiguities hinder the development of a coherent national land information system. The research aims to identify the conditions under which traditional and municipal land administration systems can be consolidated to support equitable and efficient land governance.

The study combines an integrative literature review with first-hand interviews and group discussions with traditional leaders and municipal officials. The literature review highlights legislative gaps, legal dualism, and divergent conceptions of tenure between statutory and customary systems. Fieldwork reveals contrasting practices in land allocation, record-keeping, and municipal engagement across the two case study sites. In Jozini, land allocation is largely informal, with minimal municipal involvement. Evidence of land rights is limited to oral agreements and handwritten diaries. In contrast, Thulamela and Collins Chabane municipalities demonstrate greater integration, with surveyed plots, formal site plans, and collaborative processes between traditional authorities and municipal planning departments.

Despite these differences, both sites exhibit common challenges: inadequate record-keeping, mistrust between governance structures, limited capacity, and resistance to formalisation. The study finds that traditional authorities at both sites often operate independently of municipal frameworks, leading to inconsistencies in land use planning and tenure security. The lack of spatial and legal clarity exacerbates vulnerability among land rights holders and undermines efforts to align land

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administration with sustainable development goals.

Drawing on fit-for-purpose land administration principles, we propose a framework for consolidating land information systems in South Africa. Spatially, existing aerial imagery and GNSS technologies can be used to map current landholdings, provided the process is participatory and inclusive. Legally, the adoption of flexible tools such as the Social Tenure Domain Model can bridge the gap between customary and statutory evidence of rights. Institutionally, joint land committees comprising municipal and traditional representatives are recommended to facilitate coordination, dispute resolution, and capacity development.

The findings underscore the feasibility of a consolidated land information system using existing technologies and institutional structures, contingent on political will and legislative reform. The study contributes to the discourse on land governance by offering practical recommendations for integrating plural land administration systems in South Africa. It calls for further research across other former homelands to capture the full spectrum of customary practices and inform national policy development. In doing so, it supports the broader goal of securing land tenure for all and advancing sustainable land management in line with global development agendas.

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