In Pursuit of Commercialization? The Impact of Urban Land Reform on the Poor

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Introduction

Rapid urbanization, migration, and economic growth pose challenges to traditional mechanisms of land management. There is mounting pressure to provide housing for the burgeoning urban population, and as Gabarone continues to expand into villages, spatial tensions on the urban-rural fringe are rising. This research examines the evolution of land tenure in Botswana, evaluates how the livelihoods of the poor residing in the peri-urban village of Tlokweng have changed with urbanization, and assesses whether land reform has adequately mitigated the challenges faced by urban sprawl. This study will concentrate on the urban poor, particularly female-headed households, youth, and farmers.

Scholars have argued colonial models of preferred land tenure, the paradigm of the tragedy of the commons, and the dominant cattle ranching elite have greatly shaped land reform in rural areas. The debate surrounding the influence of neoliberalism and the political elite to urban land use and development planning is less clear. As poorer residents face increasing competition with the wealthy elite over land in the peri-urban villages surrounding Gabarone, this conflict may begin to resemble the older dispute of commercialization and access to bontokho, natural resources and grazing land in rural areas. This research also compares and contrasts the main drivers and objectives of urban land policy with the main drivers and objectives of rural land policy.

Discussion

Changes in Land Use and Livelihoods: Implications for the Urban Poor

Residents have capitalized on the high demand for living accommodations, building additional rooms and houses on their plot to lease to tenants or use as extensions to gardens for use. Despite urban expansion opening doors to new financial opportunities for some residents in peri-urban areas, land scarcity and urban sprawl simultaneously pose challenges to food security, health, sustainable development, and gender equity. The most common concern, articulated by numerous residents in Tlokweng, is the loss of arable land. O. Sepoe, personal communication, April 12, 2012. Botswana currently imports over 90 percent of its food; if the trend continues, and residents lose access to arable land, “there will not be adequate land for [domestic] food production” (O. Sepoe, personal communication, April 12, 2012). Civil servants interviewed speculated the loss of subsistence-level agricultural production will result in more Thokweng residents having to purchase food from supermarkets, which will require households to devote a greater percentage of income on foodstuffs (O. Sepoe, personal communication, April 12, 2012).

Overcrowding, although not at dangerously high levels now, could worsen over the next several decades if land owned by poorer families continues to be sold to wealthier urban laborers. Urban villages, compared to urban centers and rural villages, have the highest concentration of persons per household (Table 1). Sanitation, disease, and nutrition could become serious problems in the future if peri-urban villages continue to develop characteristics of urban slums. Urbanization’s varying implications pose more of a burden to women’s livelihoods. Gathering firewood for cooking fuel and farming, both characterized as women’s work, are impacted by urban expansion and land scarcity.

![Diagram 1. Land Use Changes in Tlokweng, 1963 - 1998 (adapted from Nkambwe and Arnberg, 1996)](image)

### Results

**Thokweng: Case Study**

To meet the high demand for housing, communal land previously used for grazing and crop cultivation is being used to support population growth and village expansion (A. Sepoe, personal communication, April 12, 2012). Recent studies conducted in Thokweng and other peri-urban villages have found that residents continue to depend on arable plots for household food consumption, and natural resources on communal land for energy, cooking fuel, and building materials (Nkambwe 2003). Village residents are also legally and illegally selling plots they have been allocated by the land board, a majority being youth (A. Sepoe, personal communication, April 12, 2012). Failing financial constraints and pressure to develop the plot, youth are selling the land to outsiders, most of whom are wealthier and work in Gabarone. After selling a plot, younger residents have tended to return to reside with their parents and extended families in Thokweng.

Table 1. Number of Persons Per Room (adapted from Ministry of Lands and Housing: Review on the National Policy on Housing, 1997)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Urban (%)</th>
<th>77.16</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Urban Village</td>
<td>65.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>63.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average</td>
<td>68.12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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- How has land use changed in Thokweng over the past two decades?
- What implications has this had on the livelihoods of poorer village residents?
- What appears to be the main priority of urban land reform policies?
- Do the objectives of urban development planning coincide with the needs of village residents?

### Methods

The student first reviewed the literature on land tenure systems and surveyed the existing research on Thokweng, the case study for this paper. She conducted five semi-structured interviews with sociology and environmental science professors from the University of Botswana. The researcher also interviewed four civil servants from the Ministry of Agriculture, Ministry of Lands and Housing, and the Tlokweng Land Board. Past research on land and livelihood changes on the rural-urban fringes has used aerial mapping and geographic information systems technology to produce quantitative data; this study primarily used qualitative methods.

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### References

**Works Cited**


