



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 Gaborone 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 with 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 in urban land use and development planning is less clear. As poorer residents face increasing competition with the wealthy urban elite over land in the peri-urban villages surrounding Gaborone, this conflict may begin to resemble the older dispute of commercialization and access to boreholes, 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.

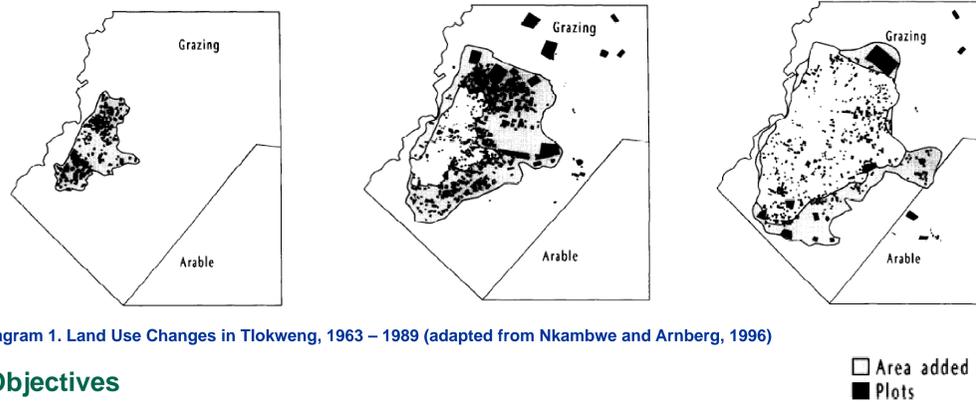


Diagram 1. Land Use Changes in Tlokweng, 1963 – 1989 (adapted from Nkambwe and Arnberg, 1996)

Objectives

This research study aims to answer:

- How has land use changed in Tlokweng 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 Tlokweng, 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.



Photo 1. Gaborone (Photo courtesy of M. Slavish, 2012)

Results

Tlokweng: 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; Nkambwe and Arnberg 1996). Recent studies conducted in Tlokweng 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). Facing financial constraints and pressure to develop the plot, youth are selling the land to outsiders, most of whom are wealthier and work in Gaborone. After selling a plot, younger residents have tended to return to reside with their parents and extended families in Tlokweng.

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 that commute to Gaborone for work. 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 equality. The most evident 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 residential land continues to compete with agricultural land, "there will not be adequate land for [domestic] food production" (D. Otimile, personal communication, April 12, 2012). Civil servants interviewed speculated the loss of subsistence-level agricultural production will result in more Tlokweng 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 (See 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 both urban expansion and land scarcity.

	1 - 2	3 - 4	5 - 6	> 6
Urban (%)	77.16	18.16	4.02	.66
Urban Village	65.22	27.43	5.38	1.96
Rural	63.78	28.56	6.31	1.35
Average	68.12	25.18	5.41	1.28

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

Conclusion

Botswana has demonstrated its commitment to democratic and participatory land management and administration in the past. The government conducts regular consultative reviews to investigate the equity of its laws, amending existing policies or drafting new legislation when necessary (Adams et al. 2003). However, the urban elite's changing interests in land and economic opportunities may challenge the thoughtful and cautious nature of land policy and management (Kalabamu 2006). If agricultural land continues to be "eaten up" by urban sprawl and no alternative livelihoods for poorer residents are supported, Tlokweng may begin to resemble the urban slums apparent in many neighboring countries. Portions within the peri-urban villages may become more vulnerable and marginalized as the wealth disparity widens, population density increases, and disempowerment and discontent grow. It remains unclear whether the urban elite will undermine the well-intentioned land policies that seek to promote tenure security for all citizens.

Policy Recommendations:

- Alternative Livelihoods
 - Accommodations for Tenants
 - Backyard Gardening
- Empowerment and Education – Youth, Women, Vulnerable Groups
- Building Upwards

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