SEEKING EQUILIBRIUM

Land Rights Adjudication in off-register, formalising and non-formal contexts in South Africa

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The studies on which paper are based were undertaken for the purposes of **implementation** of **state land disposal** in a particular provincial tenure context.

We did not have (and still have only incomplete) policy on **adjudication** when the enquiries were done.

Thus it is not a case of having worked from a policy, or even theory, to implementation but the other way round. Working **backwards** to reconstruct the process and implications.

Are other very different **contexts** for rights adjudication in SA, e.g. communal areas in E.C. & Kwazulu-Natal (NGOs).

In spite of differences, sufficient convergence to justify common approach, principles & institutional framework.
What we had and what we did

- State land with conflicting and overlapping rights between individuals and different social groupings of occupiers

- Surveyed land parcels (quite rare in rights enquiries)

- Initially hostile policy to extending protection of informal land rights to occupiers on state land – first lobbying using pilot. Then had legal tools (Int. Protection of Inf. LR Act IPILRA)

- Documentary evidence – claims and all people using the land. Documentation scattered across various organisations – NGO, government, SGO, Deeds Registry, private s., community, etc

- On the ground parcel-by-parcel audit of each and every household – structured & semi-structured interviews, mapping – started with spatial and “built in” the social or group dynamics
Finding evidence

Community meetings

Deeds Office

Title deeds

Farming audits

Interviews officials

Bills, Letters

Govt files

Community mapping

Plans

Maps

Interviews

Lessees, purchasers

Digital access
UNDERSTANDING ADJUDICATION

• Adjudication means a “process whereby all existing rights in a particular parcel of land are authoritatively ascertained”. Also the “resolution of a dispute by the application of pre-existing rules”

• In SA, LM is structured around the formal sector using the cadastral system. Govt and private sector service components within a hierarchically structured system, including surveying, conveyancing, etc.

• In the cadastral system adjudication refers to the checks by surveyors and conveyancers of all information prior to survey or transfer.

• In the informal systems these methods and tools for adjudication do not work as the cadastre is missing or broken, and therefore new conceptual frameworks, methods and tools are needed.

• Off-register systems require uncovering a wide range of evidence from different sources (not cadastre only) mostly in the field, using new legal frameworks, forms of evidence and negotiation – balancing rights.
Thus the ordinary course of adjudication of off-register rights does not necessarily imply a legal process, but rather a highly defined, predictable process that should apply standard procedures and rules regarding: what evidence is examined; how evidence is examined; and what criteria to apply to assess what evidence is admissible and in terms of what hierarchy of evidence.

In the absence of complete certainty, there must be predictability, namely that rights will be investigated and disputes will be resolved.
Not to be confused with the process whereby which existing rights are altered or new rights are created.

Also not to be confused with public planning processes in land reform, etc.

However, adjudication is closely associated with development projects/programmes – processes run hand in hand and therefore need to guard against conflating them – examine ‘old situation’ before introd. ‘new situation’.
Convergence across regions

• A range of available evidence collected & examined – cadastral only one form – underlying principles and values

• Decisions must have local social legitimacy but should resist local political interference. “Balance of probability”/sustainable

• Weight the evidence according to a set of principles. Can be conflicting interpretation of local rules around rights allocation and the termination of a right. Need “hierarchy of evidence”? 

• Adjudication needs institutional home – policy, law, organisational framework, rules on admissible evidence

• Focusing on predictability and a normative approach allows convergence of methodology in different tenure contexts where a common factor is “fluidity/variability/social process”
Disjuncture

- Disjuncture between the formal system and informal system

- There are institutional mis-fits between the dominant land management framework and informal/off-register systems

- LM in off-register is not based on land parcels. Customary tenures are based on social tenures – relationships between people – access via membership of social group – use rights attach to people not independently to parcels – evidence of rights will be less fixed, more fluid, inclined to be mediated

- A big missing link between the formal and informal therefore concerns the nature, collection, examination, storage, use & dissemination of this unconventional evidence/information

- What happens to it once it has been collected in this way?
What we have:

Constitution

Communal Land Rights Act

Interim Protection of Land Rights Act

Restitution Act

Extension of Security Of Tenure Act

laws

Rights enquiries

• Guidelines
• Procedures
• Protocol
• Report

• Ministerial approval
• Decision
• New situation
• Implement

• Land administration committees
• Land Boards
• Surveys and Deed Register
• Local (community) records

Legal framework that links to Deed Registry
Weak Land Administration processes and also LA that links to Local Government (i.e. weak on “Procedural rights”)

The formal/informal compared

Off-register rights

Evidence

Deed of grant 1894

Rules?

Adjudication

Registered rights

Evidence

Adjudication

Rules

SGO and DEEDS OFFICE
What we don’t have

- **Institutional home** for ‘unconventional’ evidence/dispute res. – new framework incomplete – missing pieces of puzzle. The integrity of the adjudication process is compromised

- A body of **impartial Adjudicators** with regulatory fwk.

- (In the formal system rulings are made based on “rules” and evidence can easily be tracked – it is stored in the system)

- In off-register, there are no **clear rules on admissible evidence**. Also, evidence goes back to where it came from – different, files, departments, shelves, computers – when another new situation arises, implies starting from scratch

- **Integrated Information system** for maintaining body of evidence. Lend weight to the process (trans-local legitimacy) & start process of developing a “**library of evidence**”
A critical component of an evolving and integrating LA system is developing an approach to evidence e.g. a library of evidence:

- Building up a policy on evidence
  - Develop pre-existing rules – normative to allow flexibility
  - Explore hierarchies of evidence – weighting of evidence
  - Use existing pilots to build policy from practice
- Designing an information system for the collection, storage and retrieval of the evidence – decentralised integrated information systems alongside decentralised registries

- More resources for adjudication function relative to technical components during “development phase” of LM bridging

- Need adjudication as ongoing back-up performed by body of impartial, trained & regulated specialists; and not once-off product-oriented exercises auditing people’s names and IDs
A predictable process using pre-existing rules:

- Good governance
- Reduces local political mobilisation by elites/leaders
- Greater certainty of rights
- Greater confidence in the system for local investment
- Citizens rights to openness, fairness and impartiality
- Weighting evidence

A library of evidence can help with:

- Storing, using, disseminating
- Security of T B.P.s
- Keep information current
- Integrate over time with other information systems
- Scale of del.
- Keeps down costs from repeats/loss
- Use for other development programmes e.g., housing, infrastructure etc.
Conventional Land Management systems fail to “read” informal systems where land parcels are absent or dysfunctional.