

# **Coping with Informal Land Management in Human Settlements**

## **- An Overview of the Status Quo -**

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### **Summary**

In most developing countries, there is a demand to integrate practices of informal land management into formal urban land management. The paper, therefore, focuses on three issues: the distinction between legitimacy (non-conformity) and criminality (illegality) in informal urban land management; the basic characteristics of informal land management; and ways to cope with it.

The paper distinguishes between non-conformist but legitimate activities on the one hand and criminal and therefore illegal activities on the other. As the transition is often fluent, the distinction is made according to the contribution that informal land managers make to public welfare.

Based on the author's research in different African countries and a comprehensive review of literature, the main activities of informal land management in human settlements (informal land acquisition, informal land tenure rights and informal land transfer) as well as the actors involved are briefly described and classified, according to the previously made distinction of non-conformity and illegality.

In the main section, the changing responses to informal land occupation/acquisition; the growing recognition of informal land tenure systems; the reaction to informal land transfers; and the still limited integration of informal actors are discussed. It is then argued that the application of the norms of good urban governance to land management in human settlements can improve the integration of effective legitimate activities into the formal urban land management while reducing criminal practices.

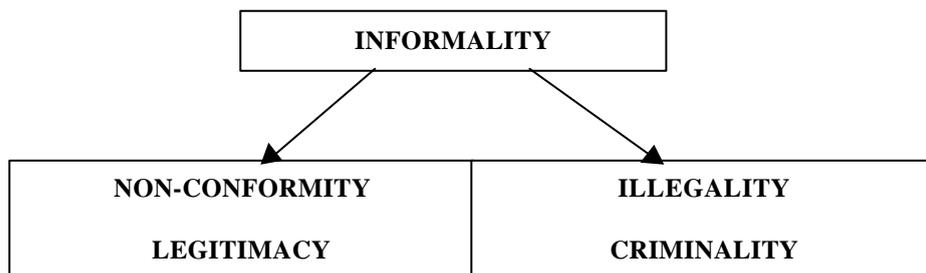
### **Introduction**

In an increasing number of developing countries, there is a demand to integrate practices of informal land management into formal urban land management. As long as such terms as irregularity, informality and illegality are not clearly defined and distinguished, it will,

however, hardly be possible to find the right answers. This paper will, therefore, focus on three issues: firstly the distinction between non-conformity (legitimacy) and illegality (criminality) in informal urban land management; secondly the basic characteristics of legitimate and criminal land management; and thirdly ways to cope with both of it.

**Informal Land Management in Human Settlements  
- Between Non-Conformity and Illegality -**

It is easy to get confused by the notions of informality and illegality. Often they are used synonymously. Sometimes the notion of illegality refers explicitly to the law, in other cases it is used to describe non-conformity to (non-appropriate) norms and regulations. Many attempts have been made to further distinguish illegal practices. Fernandes (1998) e.g. points out that there are “‘degrees of illegality’: that is, some forms of illegality tend to be more accepted and/or tolerated than others, by both the state and public opinion”. According to his findings, the more accepted forms are those involving the existence of documentary evidence. “In other words, property ownership does indeed seem to be the name of the game.” It can be questioned if this is an illegal situation at all. These ‘de facto’ rights might be non-conformist to modern state law but conform to population practices and/or customary rights. In the case of legal pluralism, activities of informal land management generally violate modern state law and regulations, at the same time, however, they correspond to the needs of the poor. In these cases, it is therefore more appropriate to talk about non-conformity or even legitimacy. There are, however, situations which do not only offend against modern state law and/or regulations but also against recognized moral values or even human rights. These criminal activities have to be distinguished and treated in separate ways. In the following, a distinction is made between non-conformist but legitimate activities on the one hand and criminal and therefore illegal activities on the other.



As the transition is often fluent, the distinction is made according to the contribution that the actors involved make to public welfare. Most of the informal land managers seek profit. There are, however, differences according to the public welfare they contribute to. The common-interest might be higher or equal self-interest as is most often the case in relation to traditional authorities. In other cases, self-interest predominates, e.g. in the case of corruption or land mafia activities. This has consequences on the types and effects of informal land management and therefore serves as indicator for non-conformity or illegality.

## **Informal Land Management in Human Settlements**

The main aspects of informal land management in human settlements are informal land occupation, informal land tenure rights and informal land transfer.

Informal land occupation comprises so-called illegal and semi-legal land occupation. The first one violates existing ownership as well as rules and regulations. The second one only offends against - building and planning - norms. In accordance to the above made distinction of non-conformity and illegality, both forms are most often non-conformist but rarely illegal. They can be regarded non-conformist to the same extent as can some cases of closed condominium developments of the middle and upper classes in the more privileged parts of the cities which often are situated in environmentally protected areas or include public spaces such as beaches. Even in the case of commercialized practices, e. g. organized group occupation by slum developers, public welfare is higher than the profit made by the slum developer. Land occupations become criminal when great amounts of money are involved that are out of all proportion to what the squatters receive for it in return. An example of criminal activities is the collection of monthly protection fees, which is common practice in some South African informal settlements (Wehrmann 1998).

Informal land tenure rights are 'per definitionem' non-conformist because they always refer to regulations a certain social group has agreed upon. Customary rights are based on the group's culture and religion. 'Non-formal property rights' are neither based on customary rights nor on modern state law. Yet, they represent 'de facto' rights. They are created through the transfer of land from the original owner to the land developer or from the land developer to his client or simply by building shacks (Farvacque/McAuslan 1992; Payne 1997). In many countries a roof already leads to 'de facto' rights. That is why land occupations are often done very quickly and over-night. Customary and 'non-formal property rights' are non-conformist because the land is not registered and the settlers do not own formal titles.

Most illegality occurs during land transfer. Apart from the above mentioned (non-conform) land transactions whose main fault is to be without formal registration, land transfers often include corruption and speculation. In most developing countries, public land delivery systems are subject to extreme misuse. Civil servants sell public land, reserved for the poor, at much higher prices on the market or they sell several plots of land to one specific client (certainly in exchange for some kind of favor) who again sells it – sometimes after years of speculation. Also poor people can be involved in speculation as so-called professional squatters are who always leave their shacks after they have been up-graded and / or legalized and build new ones at the new periphery. It's hard to just this kind of practice (Wehrmann 1999a).

Tenancy, is rather non-conformist than illegal. Sub-renting and sub-division normally only violates building laws and regulations. People sub-renting space contribute to an increase of population density but also offer housing to poor people, thereby creating a small income for

themselves. The same occurs when shacks are rented out by shack-lords, except that they earn much more money from it. Negotiating informal rental arrangements can be a strategy by slum dwellers to avoid more aggressive forms of land acquisition – either non-conformist or illegal. As a consequence, in hierarchical societies based on patronage systems land rental slums are much more common than are land occupations (Savant 2001).<sup>1</sup> In the case of tenancy, the non-conformist practices are usually not asked for by the tenants but rather forced upon them by the landowners. The latter rent their land temporary to the poor while waiting for its value to increase. Depending on the rental prices and the degree of security tenants get for them in exchange, these practices might be classified as illegal.

It becomes obvious that behind the different informal practices, it is the actors who behave either in non-conformist or illegal ways. Among the non-conformist actors are e. g. informal settlers gaining access to land through customary rights or by creating ‘de facto’ rights only violating norms which, in any case, are not suitable for the actual situation. Illegal actors are criminal land developers, middle men, corrupt civil servants and brokers/speculators who considerably reduce the amount of available land. Traditional chiefs that serve as land-administrators who are allowed to distribute land use rights among members of his community can also, in some cases, become illegal actors. This is the case when they sell land to foreigners, e.g. to commercial investors, without paying attention to the fact that they are not the land-owners and ‘forgetting’ their social responsibility vis-à-vis their community. Dealing with non-conformist and illegal actors means to integrate the former and to fight against the practices of the latter.

### **Coping with Informal Land Management in Human Settlements**

Responses to informal land occupation/acquisition, informal land tenure systems, informal land transfers, and the actors involved have changed over time. Evictions were followed by curative and preventive practices. As early as in the 1960s, it has been known that secure tenure leads to self-help activities of squatters (Doebele 1983). Therefore, over the years, legalization, physical up-grading and later on also the integration of informal settlements in the urban fabric (formalization) have become common responses to informal land occupation (Mertins/Popp/Wehrmann 1998; Ward 1998). Apart from land pooling and land readjustment, site and service projects have long been the most popular preventive measure. Since they turned out to be too costly, thus missing their target groups, current approaches rather offer sites without services. These imitate non-conformist practices by following the reversed order of urban development where occupation precedes planning, servicing and construction (Durand-Lasserve 1996 and 1998). Another preventive measure, recently introduced in Cameroon and Rwanda, is the so-called ‘guided development’ which is more similar to former site-and-service projects, but integrate informal actors such as traditional chiefs, subdividers and land developers (Durand-Lasserve 1996).

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<sup>1</sup> This is especially true for Asian countries (Savant 2001 with a recent example from Thailand).

The above described developments show that besides imitating non-conformist forms of land management, countries now also increasingly integrate them into their formal systems. This applies above all to customary rights. They are either recognized by national land policies or at least taken into consideration at the local level<sup>2</sup>. Along with the recognition of customary and non-formal property rights goes the intervention in non-conformist activities at the land market.<sup>3</sup> It becomes a common practice to establish local simplified land registers which recognize the rules of the local community such as their forms of inheritance. Often the whole settlement is registered in the formal municipal land register, by it guaranteeing tenure security to all settlers. Individual plots, however, are only registered in the local register. Generally, sites can only be sold via a community committee, that way taking them from the market (Fourie 1998 for Namibia, MLG/GTZ; Mertins/Popp/Wehrmann 1998 and Kiamba 1998 for Kenya). Another way of reducing land market activities is the limitation of the size of individual plots to reduce the interest of the middle class to invest. The latter approach demands strict control-measures in order to avoid that people buy several sites connected to each other. The above described measures have in common that they aim to avoid that squatters sell their shacks once legalization has taken place and their value increased; a quite common phenomenon. It can be regarded questionable if it is right to deprive squatters of the possibility to speculate on their land.

At present, it is rarely denied that the only feasible solution is to integrate the informal sector (meaning the non-conformist activities) in the formal sector. The question, at present, is how to do so. Kombe and Kreibich (2000) who advocate the reconciliation of formal and informal (non-conform) land management argue, that roles and responsibilities have to be divided between the state and local communities and that capacities of each to fulfill these functions need to be enhanced. According to their findings from Tanzania “socially [informally] regulated land management is especially strong in the initial phases of settlement development where it is often paralleled by little effective public planning exercise. The informal instruments are, however, losing their influence in saturated settlements with increasing demand for building land, overheated land markets and excessive housing density”. Therefore, “optimal land management entails indispensably public guidance”.

Fourie (1997) offers a concrete solution by proposing the introduction of a local land administrator. This person should fit in the local social scene and manage change at the local level. A prerequisite for this would be good social skills and technical capacity as well as

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<sup>2</sup> In recent years, most African countries have changed their attitude vis-a-vis customary rights. South Africa, Lesotho, Botswana, Tanzania and Ghana have officially recognized customary rights. The most far reaching example constitutes Botswana. Other countries such as Benin, Rwanda and Uganda confine to the ‘de facto’ integration of customary practices. The majority of states, increasingly take into consideration traditional land owners’ interests, however, without recognizing them formally. Among these countries are Ivory Coast, Cameroon, Senegal, Guinea and Togo (Durand-Lasserve 1996; Jones 1998; Payne 1997). An example for successful legalization at the local level is Dalifort/Dakar (Senegal), (Wehrmann 1999b).

<sup>3</sup> Referring to Ward (1998), formal and informal land markets are understood as a single, however fragmented markets, offering some people access to more parts than others.

access to information concerning the range of issues that affect land delivery and sustainability. The local land administrator could then identify who 'owns' what rights and assist in the transfer of this knowledge onto maps and land records. Such a land administrator who would also be responsible for coordinating land use controls at the local level "should make it possible to plan, upgrade, develop and supply housing and basic services much more quickly and effectively and in a more sustainable manner. A land administrator would serve to bring an informal land delivery system into the wider urban management system" (Fourie 1997). Fourie (1997) suggests that such a land administrator needs to have direct access to a land manager integrated in the formal system who should also be his supervisor. Such a land manager should among other things "manage the land information flows between the local, metropolitan and central level; ensure that maps of the area are locally available; assist with conflict management over boundaries and rights; and serve as a communication, negotiation and institutional link between the local level and other professionals and organizations."

The measures that have been taken or proposed up to now almost entirely focus on non-conformist land management. Reactions to illegal practices, however, remain rare. Looking at the very nature of them and analyzing who are the actors involved, shows that illegal actors can be found mainly among more or less influential people of the middle and upper classes often belonging to the local elite. They are predominantly part of the formal system, thereby able to protect their practices and guaranteeing their continuation. McAuslan (2001) calls it "the crux of the matter". Present systems of land allocation and use in the cities benefit those who operate them: the urban elite. Habitat II meets this deplorable state of affairs by giving more attention to the improvement of the political and administrative frame conditions and the role contributed to governments which "does not stop at enabling land markets to operate efficiently and transparently...governments must also direct their attention to considerations of equity in the operation of land markets...and to this end, governments at all levels and civil society must be involved in working with the disadvantaged and the poor..." (McAuslan 2001, summarizing the Habitat Agenda). With this in mind, a promising first step could be the integration of the principles of good governance into urban land management.

### **Promising measures to take: Applying the norms of good urban governance to land management in human settlements**

The global campaign for (good) urban governance proposes that good urban governance should be characterized by (UNCHS 2000):

- SUSTAINABILITY in all dimensions of urban development;
- SUBSIDIARITY of authority and resources to the closest appropriate level;
- EQUITY of access to decision-making processes and the basic necessities of urban life;
- EFFICIENCY in the delivery of public services and in promotion local economic development;
- TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY of decision-makers and all stakeholders;

- CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AND CITIZENSHIP;
- SECURITY of individuals and their living environment.

**Applied to land management in human settlements this includes<sup>4</sup>:**

**Concerning Sustainability:**

- Security of tenure for all citizens;
- Integration of informal settlements in the urban fabric (formalization);
- Recognition of the various fragments of the land market and ensuring their proper coordination;
- Private-public-partnership in land management, meaning the cooperation of the public sector with the private-profit as well as the private-non-profit sector including civil society organizations (CSO), community based organizations (CBO), non-governmental organizations (NGO);

**Concerning Subsidiarity:**

- Implementation of an agreed Land (Reform) Policy at the local level (managing access, use and control over land);
- Establishment of an urban land policy embodied within the Local Agenda 21, e.g. in the form of a Local Habitat Plan of Action;
- Decentralization of urban planning (still centralized in many countries);
- Transfer of financial / tax resources such as taxes on land and buildings;
- Development of a local tax collection system;
- Establishment of municipal or local cadastral and land registration systems accessible for low-income people;
- Introduction of a simplified local land information system accessible and user-friendly to the poor (to replace the former / actual centralized, excessively technical approaches which – if existent at all – only have been used by the middle-class and/or professionals);
- Capacity building at the local level in the above mentioned fields. Technical personnel has not only to become acquainted with simplified technical methods of land administration, urban planning and financial management but has to be capable of participatory, flexible, transparent and innovative approaches, integrating the local formal and informal land and service delivery systems;
- Legal recognition and integration of informal land management in the formal provision of land and services;
- Recognition and integration of informal institutions settling or mediating land conflicts at the sub-urban level;

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<sup>4</sup> Some of the aspects mentioned can be found and discussed in detail in Durand-Lasserve, Lacroux, Fourie and Qvist (all in: Habitat Debate 1997) and Kreibich 2000.

**Concerning Equity:**

- Efficient and equitable land policies which ensure secure access to affordable and suitable land and property ownership to all, thereby guaranteeing adequate shelter to all. As a first step to achieve this goal of Habitat II, existing national land delivery systems have to be reviewed and land management responsibilities decentralized (see above). This process is already taking place in some countries where it is also accompanied by local capacity-building programs;
- Ensuring that women and men have equal access to decision-making processes, resources and basic services and that this access is measured through gender disaggregated data, e.g. in the context of physical upgrading and legalization of informal settlements;
- Establishing quotas for women representatives in local authorities deciding on land use and ownership, on urban land policy and land reform and encourage their promotion to higher management positions within municipalities;
- Promoting equal inheritance rights for land and property, credit, natural resources and technologies;
- Protecting / Recognizing (within the national context) customary land rights of indigenous people as well as non-formal land rights;
- Removing unnecessary barriers to secure tenure and to the supply of finance;
- Creating fair and predictable regulatory frameworks on land management;
- Promoting awareness campaigns, education and enabling practices regarding, in particular, legal rights with respect to tenure, land ownership and inheritance for women, so as to overcome existing barriers.

**Concerning Efficiency:**

- Development of efficient, transparent and simplified land delivery mechanism, including cadastral systems, land registration mechanisms, land transactions, legal frameworks, land valuation and taxation;
- Delivery and regulation of public services through partnership with the private profit and private non-profit (civil society) sectors, e.g. while supplying sites with or without services for the urban poor or during physical upgrading of informal settlements.
- Promotion of integrated, inter-sectoral planning and management;
- Improving the effectiveness and efficiency of local revenue collection (coming from taxation on land and buildings).

**Concerning Transparency and Accountability:**

- Regular, organized and open consultations of citizens on all matters concerning land;
- Removing administrative and procedural incentives for corruption, including mechanism to avoid that cheap land released by the public sector and designated to the urban poor is taken by officials and civil servants and sold at a much higher value on the market (often after years of speculation);
- Ensuring transparent, comprehensive and accessible systems in transferring land rights and legal security of tenure;
- All measures that improve transparency in general, such as establishing codes of conduct, promoting an ethic of service to the public by putting into place adequate remuneration for

public servants, creating public feedback mechanisms, providing access to information (on land (management)) and the like.

#### **Concerning Civic Engagement and Citizenship:**

- Encouraging participatory approaches to land policy (and land reform);
- Introducing participatory decision-making concerning land management;
- Establishing the legal authority for civil society to participate effectively through such mechanisms as development councils and neighborhood advisory committees;
- Making use of mechanisms such as public hearings and surveys, town hall meetings, citizen's forums, city consultation and participatory strategy development, including issue-specific working groups and participatory planning workshops;
- Local land use planning at the sub-urban level based on a dialog with the affected people;
- Empowerment of people to claim (existing) land rights through information campaigns and sensibilization;
- Strengthening existing and new people's movement to facilitate participation of people in land issues.

#### **Concerning Security:**

- Promoting security of tenure, recognizing a variety of forms of legal tenure and providing counseling and mediation for people at risk of forced evictions;
- Implementing environment planning and management methodologies based on stakeholder involvement;
- Raising awareness of the risk of disasters and formulating local emergency management plans, based on reduction of risk, readiness, response and recovery, for natural and human-made disasters and, where necessary, relocating residents of disaster-prone areas.

The examples show that there is a high potential to integrate non-conformist land management into the formal system and to fight illegal practices through the implementation of urban governance norms; above all subsidiarity, equity, transparency and civic engagement. A transparent, decentralized urban land management integrating the private profit and non-profit sector based on the principle of equity can be seen as the most appropriate answer to the current situation, allowing the integration of the positive aspects of informal land management (non-conformist activities) while reducing the negative aspects (illegal activities). In regard to tenure in Sub-Saharan francophone African countries, Durand-Lasserve (2001) claims that "potential for change is clearly linked with the decentralization process, the emergence of municipalities with effective land management responsibilities, and the pressure exerted by populations concerned".

However, there has to be a clear distinction of the roles and responsibilities between local, intermediate (if in place) and national levels as well as between the public and the two private sectors (private profit sector and civil society). Further more, there has to be a clearly defined and transparent commitment of the State concerning financial aspects of land management. At the national level, the State also has to provide a political and legal frame (national land

policy) including laws and by-laws to guarantee the recognition of human rights and the norms of good (urban) governance in all matters concerning land and its management. This might require the participatory reformulation of a national land policy. Once, an adequate political, legal and institutional frame has been established, Civil Society can play an enabling role for the implementation of the new land policy.

### **Future Challenges**

In spite of the comprehensive urban governance agenda, most countries currently focus more on efficient urban management, comprising the improvement of institutional performance, decentralization (in the sense of deconcentration rather than devolution), privatization, public-private partnerships and social policy ‘safety nets’ to ensure political stability. “The remarkable similarity in problem definition and policy design and implementation from one country to another is the product not of a shared policy *model*, but rather of a consensus between governments and international financial institutions on a common policy *objective*: promoting the development of the formal market” (Durand-Lasserve 1998).

Functioning property rights are therefore often seen as the most important remedy, especially in the context of land management. Putting life into the “dead capital” of the informal sector is what de Soto (2000) asks for in his new work “The Mystery of Capital”. What is lacking in developing countries, according to de Soto, are not innovative entrepreneurs but their access to formal property rights systems with cadastre and register. By formalizing informal property, landed property becomes capital. The idea that giving titles to informal settlers will result in land markets to work and squatters to have access to credit which together will lead to the up-grading of the informal settlement and to the reduction of poverty is also promoted by international organizations. While there is nothing to say against de Soto’s plea for a “bottom-up” formulation of new property rights systems which recognize/integrate informal rights and that, therefore, should be specific to each nation (instead of copying Western property rights systems), the conclusion that this will be the key to a functioning economy and to poverty reduction is what has to be questioned. Why should a bank give credit to someone who owns a shabby shack in an inundation area in the periphery of the city far from every infrastructure? And even if it does, what happens after the credit has been used up? I don’t want to deny that home-ownership in informal settlements does have advantages: tenure security often leads to an increase in self-help activities and investments in the houses and the settlement as a whole. But titles are not everything. Or to put it the other way round: it is not necessarily a full individual title what is needed. Tenure security can be achieved in much simpler and more cost-efficient ways<sup>5</sup>. What I want to point out is that the market by itself won’t make it. Functioning markets are ONE instrument among others but they cannot solve the whole problem of poverty.

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<sup>5</sup> For examples see Durand-Lasserve 1998 and Payne (up-coming)

Instead of delegating the entire responsibility to the market, governments need to improve access to land by groups whose needs are not met by the market. “The state should regulate the supply of land for housing, ensuring that land can be acquired by different means and that the norms it establishes are respected” (Durand-Lasserve 1998).

## **Conclusion**

The paper shows that incorporating the norms of (good) urban governance - sustainability, subsidiarity, equity, efficiency, transparency and accountability, civic engagement and citizenship, and security - in urban land management offers many ways to improve the current situation of poor urban land management; making it possible to integrate non-conformist activities while reducing illegal practices.

However, the discussion also illustrates that ongoing policies do not incorporate all elements of good governance but tend to focus on neo-liberal approaches, relying mainly on the market. There is a danger that good urban governance will be reduced to a ‘good market ideology’, especially after the “good” of the urban governance campaign has already been dropped and all that has been left is urban governance. Measures that during the last decades haven’t been realized by the state cannot be transferred entirely to ‘the market’ nor to civil society, defined by the actors of the non-profit private sector. This is a misperception of the demand for a new (definition of the) state. Without the state, a sustainable development is not possible. Its role, however, has changed from a doer of development to a partner, catalyst and facilitator (World Bank 1997). What is needed is “to bring the state closer to the people” (World Bank 1997). At the same time it should become more transparent, efficient and effective. This can be achieved through capacity building, institution building and by reducing it to its central competencies. This calls for politicians and civil servants which take over responsibility and act unselfishly following long-term strategies and objectives in the interest of all citizens. Therefore, to overcome persisting weaknesses in urban land management, ALL criteria of good governance need to be applied.

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