

Land and connectivity:

Research summary

AFRICAN CITIES
RESEARCH CONSORTIUM

May 2024



In this research summary, we highlight key findings and draw some important insights from our cross-city comparison. However, we emphasise that very diverse colonial legacies and postcolonial land reforms, as well as variation in the extent of ethnoreligious fractionalisation and experience of violent conflict, make drawing cross-case policy implications particularly challenging.

Focus cities

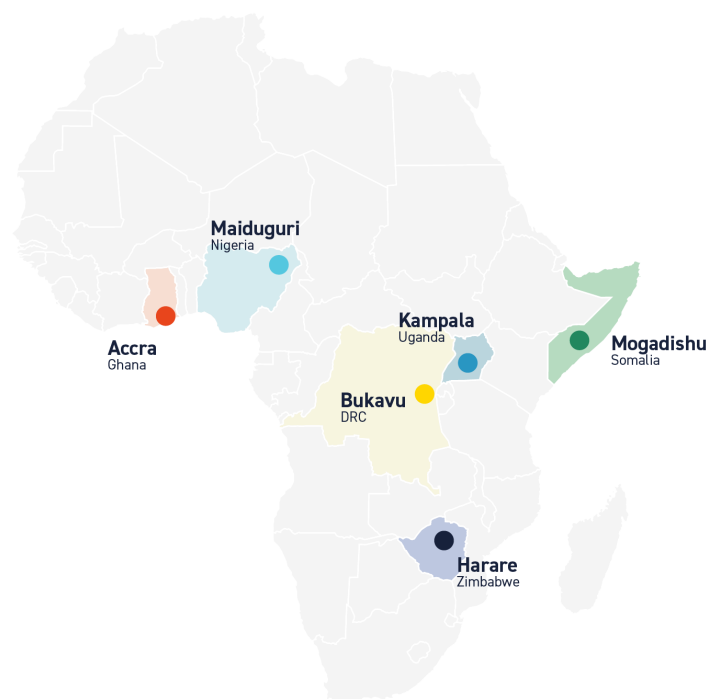
In this domain, our broader research team conducted research in six cities: **Accra** (Ghana), **Bukavu** (DRC), **Kampala** (Uganda), **Harare** (Zimbabwe), **Maiduguri** (Nigeria) and **Mogadishu** (Somalia).

Figure 1: Cities covered by the land and connectivity domain research

Context

Land is a notoriously challenging issue in African cities, given often dysfunctional and under-resourced systems of land administration that have to engage with highly inequitable colonial legacies, widespread speculation and forms of elite capture, placing huge pressures on the sector. A range of policies have been promoted to address issues related to urban land, from regularisation and titling programmes to experiments with different forms of land and property taxation, to community enumeration and mapping tools.

Rather than duplicate the substantial and growing research and scholarship in this area, this domain focused primarily on the ways in which land challenges intersect with connectivity – in particular, with the development of transport and mobility infrastructures, and more tentatively with digital infrastructures that can change the way land is used, valued, exchanged and managed.



Key findings

- Land values are driven by multiple factors often not considered in conventional property development and value capture models.** These intersect in complex ways and the relationship between land value and connectivity is not as straightforward as often assumed.
- Many societal actors are involved in capturing the rising value of urban land, including various forms of brokers.** Actors involved in capturing land value are diverse, from “traditional” authorities and families to youth gangs and militias. These actors sometimes threaten insecurity, in order to commodify security provision on the land. Land brokers – agents connecting buyers and sellers – play a central role in land markets in many African cities.
- Urban growth and residential development often proceed with particular rapidity in areas without connective infrastructure – in contrast to planning assumptions that urban growth is *stimulated* by increased connectivity.** Relatively weak state presence in many peripheral areas facilitates rapid development, resulting in limited connective infrastructure provision alongside greater opportunities for non-state actors to dominate the land and connectivity domain.
- Systems for property taxation vary massively in terms of what is included in the tax base, systems of valuation and tax rates – making cross-city learning highly challenging.** Property taxation is often weak, due to poor administration and valuation techniques, inter-agency political tensions, “dual” systems of land valuation, the extent of non-state taxation/value capture, and the fact that the property development frontier is often highly underserved by infrastructure.
- Digital innovations feature heavily in land systems and can make a difference to “low-hanging fruit” in terms of land registration and taxation.** However, these face many of the same issues that manual systems faced and although they can create new opportunities for women and marginalised groups, they need to be better nuanced to avoid further/continuing land injustices.
- Three types of politics are evident within the domain, which we characterise as *land politics*, *territorial politics* and *institutional politics*.** *Land politics* refers to situations where property in land is the focal point of contestation. *Territorial politics* refers to contestations that are not about land-as-property so much as control over geographic space, who gets to access and use that space, and how land is connected to other parts of the city. In this respect, territorial politics is at the heart of the land-connectivity nexus. *Institutional politics* refers to how formal and informal governance systems relating to land and connectivity are arranged, and the ways in which this is contested.
- These three different forms of politics are evident everywhere, but their relative weight differs, depending on the nature of the political settlement.** Land politics is a dominant feature of all cities, in varying forms, but might be overlain with intense institutional or territorial politics that pose their own distinct challenges.
- Different forms of *land politics* coexist in our case study cities, but some dominate in particular cases.** We identify three different ways in which land is politically significant: in terms of its *political symbolism* and role in legitimising discourses; in terms of *patterns of distribution and redistribution*; and as an *economic and speculative asset*. These forms of land politics coexist in different cities, with some stronger than others for historically specific reasons.





Implications for urban reform

1. **Reform approaches may need to work more on building government *legitimacy* versus state *capacity*, depending on which individuals and agencies are seen as the primary “land-grabbers”.** In some cases, where land politics is primarily based on patterns of historical dispossession by the state, state agencies are seen as particularly illegitimate in relation to land issues. Here non-state actors, such as traditional authorities, clan elders or religious leaders, have much greater legitimacy in distributing and managing land.

This is evident in **Accra** or **Mogadishu**, despite their significant differences. Here the building of government legitimacy in the land sector and *trust* in state institutions to regulate and administer land may be more important than building greater capacity of specific government agencies, at least in the short to medium term.

In other cases, private elites and politicians – rather than state agencies – are seen as the main perpetrators and beneficiaries of land-based exclusion (such as **Kampala** or **Bukavu**). Here the challenge is to build the capacity of the state to limit illicit elite land deals and deliver more equitable distributions of land and land value (for example, through land tenure and taxation reforms), while bringing together civil society stakeholders to keep check on any enhanced state capacity and build consensus around fair land policy.

2. **The varied balance between *land politics*, *territorial politics* and *institutional politics* in different cities has implications for reform prospects.** All cities face political challenges linked to weaknesses in systems of tenure and/or property taxation and land administration. Approaches to urban land

reform need to be attuned to how reforms in these areas might be derailed by territorial or institutional politics.

In political settlements where territorial politics may overwhelm land reform efforts (such as **Harare** or **Mogadishu**), attempting to address challenges of transport connectivity infrastructure is advisable prior to major land reform initiatives.

In “broad dispersed” settlements such as **Accra**, tackling institutional conflicts, agency overlaps and intergovernmental disputes will be a particularly important foundation for land reform.

3. **Finding ways to engage with land brokers and other intermediaries will be crucial to reform efforts.** This is particularly likely to be the case in settlements with dispersed state power and where urban land’s role as an economic and speculative asset is central to land politics, such as **Kampala**.

Brokers come in very different forms, depending on the position of their clients in the socioeconomic hierarchy. This means different kinds of engagement are required, depending on whether policy initiatives involve reforming land registration, taxation or tenure systems themselves.

As these actors increasingly work digitally, land reforms will also need to engage with questions of how digital space is regulated. The potential to generate greater transparency in land transactions, and relatedly land pricing, can also support building property valuation capacity for tax purposes, as well as the legitimacy of the tax.

4. **Policymakers should maintain awareness that technical interventions can mask or even worsen existing political and institutional conflicts.** However effective they might be at streamlining processes or reducing corruption, new technologies developed for the land domain should have broad buy-in across relevant government agencies if they are not to generate new forms of technopolitical resistance.

Control and ownership of the data generated by such systems should be thoroughly scrutinised, as should the ease with which records can be changed, and where the legal authority rests to do this. The opinions of a wide range of stakeholders involved in the present *de facto* land regulation and registration processes should feed into this.

Policy implications linked to other ACRC domains and city systems

- > **Informal settlements** – Actors involved in facilitating land transactions, subdivision and the *de facto* regulation of land are often also heavily involved in informal settlements, either as landowners, brokers or informal planners and developers. Land reforms that attempt to change how land is transacted and taxed could have knock-on effects for owners and renters in informal settlements.

Major tenure reforms (such as changes to *mailo*¹ tenure in **Kampala**) could therefore have substantial implications for informal settlements. Large connectivity investments could also radically alter land values, leading to risks of eviction on present informal settlement land.

- > **Neighbourhood and district economic development** – Efforts to curtail non-state value capture on urban land could improve the prospects for other sectors of the economy, given the amount that is currently extracted in many cities by various forms of “land entrepreneurs”. Enhanced property taxation holds the potential to improve connectivity infrastructure provided by the state. However, connectivity could also redistribute economic opportunities around the city in unplanned ways, leading some areas to lose out, as well as generating the “flight” of value from one place to another, pricing businesses out of some areas.

Planning any land reforms alongside reforms to other crucial city systems, such as transport, energy and telecommunications, could be important to avoid perverse consequences.

- > **Safety and security** – Many forms of non-state land regulation and value capture are underpinned by violence, particularly involving young men, and related interpersonal and community insecurity. The normalisation of insecurity on urban land has fuelled livelihoods that depend on provision of commodified security in relation to land.

Efforts to bolster state legitimacy and capacity to regulate and tax land will need to take into account the knock-on effects on the livelihoods of urban groups currently benefiting from weak state presence, as well as how they might affect the gender dimensions of land insecurity.

¹ A form of freehold which dominates much of the city, especially in the periphery.



About this summary

This is a summary of a Working Paper, written by the African Cities Research Consortium (ACRC) land and connectivity domain leads: Tom Goodfellow, Abdifatah Tahir, Liza Rose Cirolia and Ransford Acheampong.

Read the full paper

Photo information (by order of appearance):

1. Maiduguri Bama Road, Somalia - Borno Geographic Information System (BOGIS); 2. Road in wet season, Kampala, Uganda - Andi Edwards / iStock; 3. Chorkor pedestrian bridge in Accra, Ghana - Diana Mitlin; 4. Aerial view over Mogadishu, Somalia - Maxamed Qalid / Wikimedia Commons (CC BY-SA 4.0).



ACRC is funded by UK International Development. The views expressed here do not necessarily reflect the UK Government's official policies.

Find out more

➤ www.African-Cities.org

🐦 [@AfricanCities_](https://twitter.com/AfricanCities_)

✉ bit.ly/ACRCnews

📧 AfricanCities@manchester.ac.uk