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Implications of peri-urban land reform programs on urban land markets: a case study of Harare, Zimbabwe

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Zimbabwe implemented the Fast-Track Land Reform Program (FTLRP) in the year 2000. This program has had far-reaching implications on urban development, especially on urban land markets in cities and towns. This paper highlights the implications of the land reform program on urban land markets, using Harare as a case study. The paper is based on document review (policy, academic and development literature) and interviews with key informants with experience and knowledge of the land reform and its associated implications on urban land markets. Our analysis demonstrates that the land reform process in peri-urban spaces was complex and largely driven by political interests. The land reform process distorted the urban planning processes, leading to disparities in the land markets. Such disparities include informal and uncontrolled processes of accessing land and, ultimately, rapid development of informal settlements in the city. Political elites and land barons took advantage of the land reform program extorting money from desperate home-seekers. We conclude that the distortion of urban land markets by politically driven land reform processes negatively affects sustainable urban development. Overall, the paper makes a valuable contribution to the growing literature on land reforms and peri-urban development in Africa, demonstrating the complex and multidimensional implications of land reform programs on peri-urban land markets. Based on the study findings, the paper provides a set of policy recommendations aimed at improving the effectiveness and equity of land reform programs in African peri-urban areas.

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Introduction

The subject of land reform programs has gained significant attention among urban scholars (Lombard and Rakodi, 2016; Marongwe, 2003; Scoones, 2018). This increased attention is especially widespread in the African context where access to land was largely controlled by the European governments during the colonial era (Freund, 2007; Müller and Kotzur, 2019). Land is a point of contestation in Africa largely because it is highly valued and acts as a means of production, power and domination among different social classes (Ntsebeza, 2005). The utility of land is greater in urban areas, where conflicting rationalities among different actors escalate the demand creating land shortages, especially among the urban poor. Land being a scarce resource in urban areas, tends to be highly priced and takes centre stage in urban development narratives (Agheyisi, 2020; Xu, 2019). Therefore, contestations for urban land are always multi-faceted, and the elites usually dominate in accessing the land, with the powerless and poor being marginalised. Land reforms are meant to alleviate the plight of the poor and ensure that every citizen has access to land without discrimination (Marongwe, 2003; Müller and Kotzur, 2019). Often, such land reform programs meant to redress existing inequalities in land access and ownership have implications on urban land markets. This is so because urban areas are economic hubs which thrive based on economic transactions. The rationale is that urban areas develop due to surplus capital (Harvey, 2012). Land being a factor of production and a form of capital for urban development that can be used as collateral becomes a critical economic resource in cities. Singh (2013:30) recounts that capital accumulation drives urbanisation since it is driven by individual-utility-maximisation behaviour that destroys the urban commons and its appropriation for private interests. Hence, there is a need to understand the dynamics on urban land markets considering the multiple transactions that occur following land reform programs. Urban land markets function through a complex interplay of (in)formal processes, involving various stakeholders such as government agencies, private developers, landowners, financial institutions and urban residents (Bhanye et al. 2023). These markets facilitate the exchange, valuation, and development of land, driven by economic transactions and regulatory frameworks.

In Zimbabwe, like many other developing countries, urban land markets face unique challenges due to historical inequities, political influences, and economic instability (Bhanye, 2024; Gough and Yankson, 2000). The formal land market is often undermined by bureaucratic inefficiencies and corruption, leading to a parallel informal market where land is traded outside official channels (Chirisa et al. 2014). This duality complicates land access and ownership, impacting urban planning and development (Matamanda et al. 2024). Land has always taken centre stage in Zimbabwe, resulting in different models of land reforms being implemented since the country gained independence from British colonial rule in 1980. Many studies have explored the land reform process in Zimbabwe, mainly focusing on the Fast Track Land Reform Program launched in 2000 (Hammar et al. 2003; Laurie, 2016). Other studies have examined the implications of land reforms on urbanisation and housing development (see Marongwe, 2003), and others have analysed the livelihood implications of the land reform process (Guzha and Machingura, 2017). Regarding land markets, Marongwe et al. (2011) have undertaken a scoping study that only examined the governance of urban land markets in Zimbabwe. There is a paucity of knowledge and academic research on the implications of land reform programs on urban land markets. The land reform processes have also largely been seen as linked to rural and communal areas. However, Zimbabwe's land reform processes particularly the Fast Track Land Reform Program (FTLRP) have

had far-reaching implications on urban land markets (Chakwizira, 2021).

Against this background and premised on this research gap, this paper contributes to the discussions on land resettlement and urban and peri-urban development. To achieve this, the article: (i) characterises the peri-urban land reform processes focusing on Harare as a case study; (ii) evaluates the implications of the peri-urban land reform program on the land markets; also analyse the stakeholders involved in the land reform programs. The key research question guiding the discussion presented in this article is *How have peri-urban land reform programs impacted urban land markets in Harare, Zimbabwe, and what are the implications for sustainable urban development?* Specifically, the article argues that effective peri-urban land reform should be undertaken such that planning, politics and power discourses do not compromise the functionality of the land markets - a critical component of urban development. The efficiency of the land markets translates into the production of inclusive, sustainable and resilient human settlements as espoused in the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 11.

This article is organized as follows: The section "Literature Review" provides a literature review on land reform and urban land markets, outlining the theoretical framework. The section "Methodology" describes the methodology used in this study, detailing data collection and analysis procedures. Section "Results" presents the findings of the study, focusing on the characterization of peri-urban land reform processes and its implications on urban land markets in Harare. Section "Discussion" discusses the implications of these findings on urban land markets and the stakeholders involved. Finally, the Section "Conclusion" concludes the paper by summarizing the key insights and suggesting policy recommendations for improving land reform programs and urban land markets in Zimbabwe.

Literature review

Urban land markets and their importance in urban development. In many African cities, land is a valuable property that is often contested and a cause of many conflicts and wars (Bourne, 2011; Maathai, 2009; Mills et al. 2019). Land is characterised as immovable property that can be transferred from one person to another depending on the fulfilment of certain property rights. Unlike other properties that may be moved from one place to the other, land is immovable and finite. The implication is that, regardless of temporal changes and developments upon the land, including buildings and roads that may be dismantled, land remains in its fixed space. Therefore, transactions in land occur but only include the exchange of rights of entitlements to a particular piece of land. Such transactions are undertaken on the land market, which Mahoney et al. (2007:1) have defined as mechanisms, which exist when and wherever it is possible to exchange rights in land, usually for agreed amounts of money.

The land market theory postulates that in a land market, the value of the land is determined by the plot size and the location of the land (Alonso, 1960; Kihato, 2010). There is a correlation between the location of the land and its value in that land close to services such as schools, transport routes, and other amenities tends to be valued more (Riddell, 2004). However, the increasing rate of urbanisation in cities in the Global South and the sprawling of cities have made land on the urban periphery to be in high demand, regardless of the absence of services such as water and sanitation. In such instances, this land is also available for redistribution - located away from the centre and basic services. Considering that land is scarce in urban areas, land markets in most African cities, for example, Accra in Ghana

(Gough and Yankson, 2000) and Lagos, Nigeria (Agboola et al. 2017) tend to flourish best in areas where demand for land becomes very high. The high commercial opportunities explain this, and migration tends to stimulate land market development (Xu, 2019).

The significance of land markets in urban development is invaluable. This is because land is a means of production that supports virtually all economic development activities in urban areas. The utility of land is shown in places like Hong Kong, where land is very scarce and extremely expensive to the extent that cities have been developed without grounds (Frampton et al. 2018). Land markets also assist in allocating ownership and rights in land, ensuring the economic use of land and associated assets. In this way, land value capture and taxation are well defined, making it possible for the success of the national economies (Chakwizira, 2021). The rationale is that land value may be recognised through markets, which enable the collection of taxes, such as capital gains tax and land value capture that act as mechanisms of local authority finances (Chavunduka, 2020).

Land markets may either be formal or formal. Formal land markets are characterised by formalised processes, including well-defined institutional and legal frameworks responsible for guiding and regulating market transactions (Bhanye, 2023a; Marongwe et al. 2011). The courts of law are usually used to protect land rights through the application of common law. In the formal land markets, individual property rights are normally observed. Sometimes land remains vested in the state, such that the state may expropriate any land, compensating individuals based on the value of their land. Mostly, land is freehold, and owners are guided by prevailing market prices that enable them to charge certain amounts for the land. It is evident from experiences in the operations of land markets in China that aside from clear policies and enforceable laws, there is a need for institutional frameworks that promote consistency, responsibility and accountability in decision-making within the overall national land policy (Xu, 2019).

On the contrary, informal land markets consist of various practices and contain characteristics of social practices, civil law and, at times, customary law, all meant to conform to certain urban conditions (Bhanye, 2023a; Sanyal, 2018). Informal markets, although often perceived as illegal in most instances, thrive in most African cities, consisting of players like the state, land agents, and some financial institutions (Bhanye et al. 2023; Kihato, 2010). Informal land markets accommodate most of the urban poor, especially migrants to urban areas who buy or rent customary land in the peri-urban areas (Bhanye, 2024). The emergence of informal land markets may be attributed to several factors, including the collapse of formal institutions, corruption, state capture and the political economy of land allocation and management (Cirolia and Berrisford, 2017). Studies also show that urban land markets are not static; they tend to be dynamic and complex, oscillating between the formal and informal, leaving a blurred separation of categories of formal and informal land markets (Chakwizira, 2021). The foregoing discussion highlights that different factors influence land markets, and for this study, we focus on land reform as discussed in the forthcoming section.

The nexus between land reform and urban land markets. After independence, most African countries inherited spatial inequalities that were characterised by landlessness among most indigenous Africans. In attempts to redress these inequalities, land reform programs were implemented to emancipate the landless. Such programs include land redistribution to those in need of it. The state is usually the main stakeholder facilitating the land reform process, considering land is often recognised as state

property in post-colonial African states (Bernstein, 2003). When the state engages in land reform programs, the logic is to empower the previously disadvantaged groups (Gopaldas, 2018). In this way, land is available on the land market, meaning that there will be a supply of land which can then be transferred to the potential beneficiaries (Kihato, 2010). Like any other programs, land reforms will thus require adequate planning so that those in need of the land will benefit, while identifying the potential properties that may be put on the market. The state is thus involved in land reforms because planning is often undertaken by the state as argued by most proponents (Fainstein and Fainstein, 1979; Healey, 2010) that planning is a state function. Therefore, planning has been perceived as a state activity and apparatus that seeks to further the interests of the elite – mainly the politicians who own land and other means of production.

However, it is interesting to note that when planning is being undertaken, and land reform programs are being implemented, it is not always in the public's best interests. Decision-makers, who are mainly politicians and have the power to define the norm, normally advocate for land reform programs to advance their own agendas and interests (Mcgregor, 2013). In essence, land reform programs may be undertaken in such a way that only a few individuals benefit from the process. Land grabbing may result, where only a few individuals take ownership of prime land in the urban areas, intending to sell it to desperate landless urban citizens (Akinola and Wissink, 2019). Such practices show how the land reform programs may end up informalising the urban land markets. Moreover, land reforms may result in the overriding of formal processes of land rights transfer when the informal market takes over, and citizens lose confidence in the functionality of the formal land markets (Cirolia and Berrisford, 2017).

Methodology

Rooted in a case study research design (Algozzine and Hancock, 2017), this study was guided by a qualitative paradigm to understand the nexus of land reform programs and urban land markets. The case study approach enabled an in-depth analysis of issues on land reform and urban land markets from the case study area - Harare. This is because case studies provide an intensive analysis and description of a single unit or system bounded by space and time directly influencing policy, procedures, and future research (Yin, 2014; Algozzine and Hancock, 2017). In this way, the case study approach made it possible for the researchers to understand the complexities in land reform and urban land markets nexus from the perspectives of the participants in the selected case. Figure 1 shows the study area.

As illustrated in Fig. 1, the land reform and land markets understudy go beyond the traditional Harare to include the peri-urban farms falling under the Greater Harare Combination master plan.

Data was collected through triangulation of primary and secondary data sources. This methodological approach was consistent with the argument by Creswell (2013) that researchers in qualitative research seek to explore, understand, and present the perspectives of the participants while getting as close to them in their natural setting as possible, hence the need to collect data from multiple sources. Secondary data was first undertaken to gain insights into the nature and model of land reform that was used in Zimbabwe over the past decades. Considering the various studies undertaken relating to land reform in Zimbabwe, the use of secondary data sources became pertinent for this study as Tracy (2013) explained that secondary data is a convenient data source that is cheap and readily available to the researcher. The documents reviewed in this study include the Constitution of

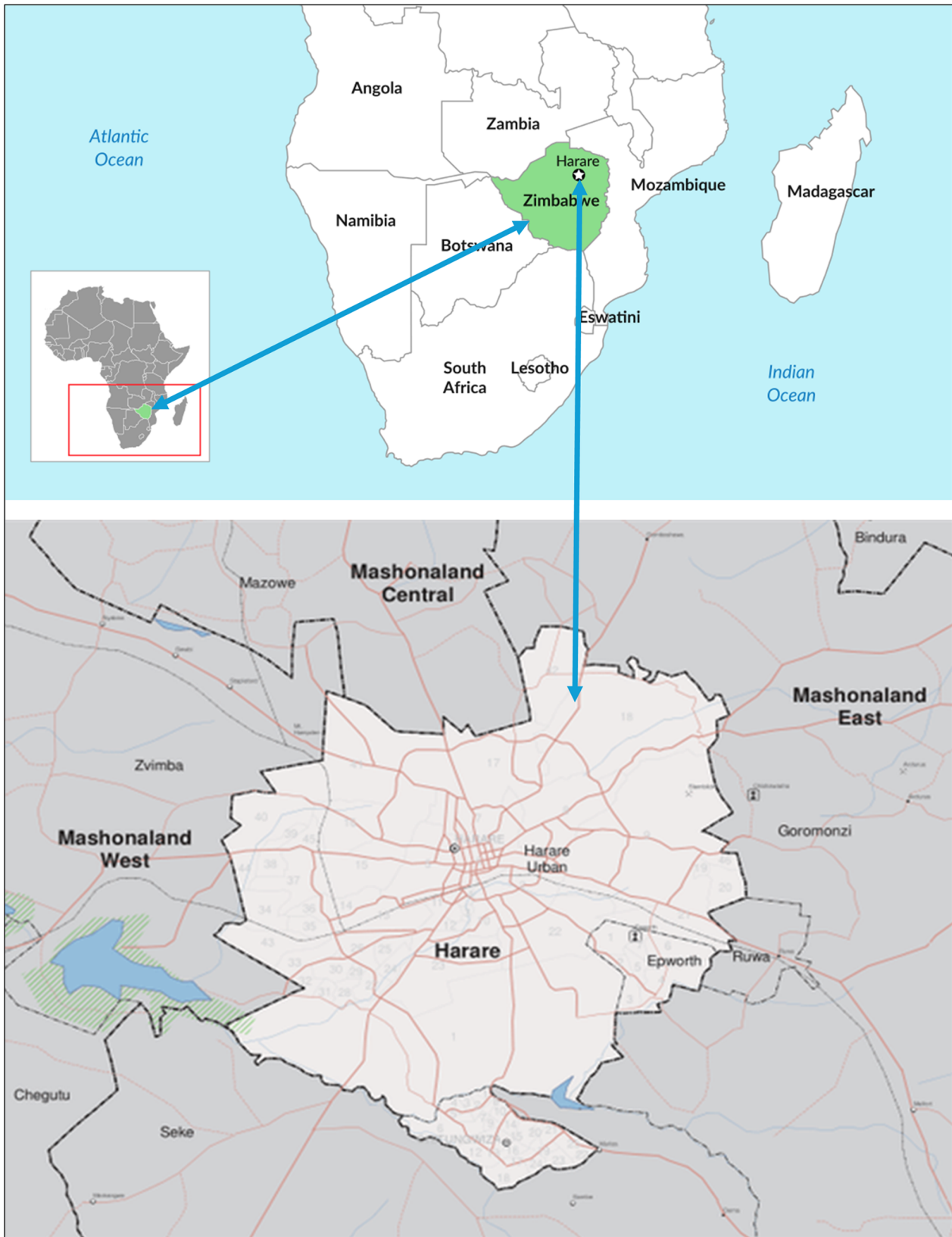


Fig. 1 Map of greater Harare area. Source: Authors.

Zimbabwe Amendment No 20 of 2013, the Regional Town and Country Planning Act of 1996, the Land Acquisition Act of 1992, peer-reviewed journal articles, research reports and books. These sources provided a historical and legislative context to the study,

offering insights into the policies and frameworks governing land reform and urban land markets in Zimbabwe.

Primary data were collected through semi-formal unstructured interviews with purposively selected key informants. These key

informants include five land use planning professionals, five war veterans, three land valuation experts, three city officials (town planner, deputy-city planner and physical planner) and one ministry official from the Ministry of Local Government’s Department of Physical Planning (DPP). Key informants were selected based on their expertise and involvement in the land reform processes and urban land markets. Land use planning professionals and city officials were included to provide a professional and administrative perspective. War veterans were selected due to their significant role in the land reform program, while land valuation experts offered insights into the economic aspects of land markets. The ministry official was included to represent the government’s stance and policy implementation details. An interview schedule guided the process, ensuring that all relevant topics were covered while allowing flexibility for in-depth discussion. Each interview lasted approximately 60 min and was recorded with the interviewees’ consent. Informed consent was obtained before the interviews, and ethical approval for the study was granted by the Ethical Committee from the University of the Free State (approval number UFS-HSD2020/1704/192).

The data analysis process involved content analysis for secondary data and textual analysis for primary data. Content analysis helped identify recurring themes and patterns in the legislative and policy documents. For the interview data, thematic analysis was employed to synthesize responses in relation to the study objectives. This approach ensured that the analysis was aligned with the research aims, providing a detailed

understanding of the implications of peri-urban land reform programs on urban land markets in Harare.

Results

Characterising Harare. Harare, formerly Salisbury, is the capital city of Zimbabwe which was initially established as a fort for the British Pioneer Column in 1890. Failing to find any mineral prospects as they had anticipated, the British engaged in agriculture activities as the dominant economic activity (Zinyama et al. 1993). Consequently, the area became predominantly a farming region, although most of these farms later became residential suburbs. At least 414 016 hectares of land in Harare were formerly occupied for agricultural purposes by the Europeans (Sachikonye, 2003). Examples of such farms that eventually became residential suburbs include Bromley-Ruwa established in the 1890s as a commercial farming area, Epworth Farm founded in 1892, Mt Pleasant Farm, Mabelreign Farm, Willowvale Farm and Lochnivar Farm in the north and western part of the city (Muchadenyika, 2020). Figure 2 presents residential suburbs in Harare (Fernandez, 2013).

Urban development was concentrated within the city’s boundary when Harare was the European enclave, and Africans were restricted from owning property in the city (Bond, 1993). This was in line with the concept of separate development, which characterised the development of the city, with the Europeans having an upper hand in the shaping of the city’s development

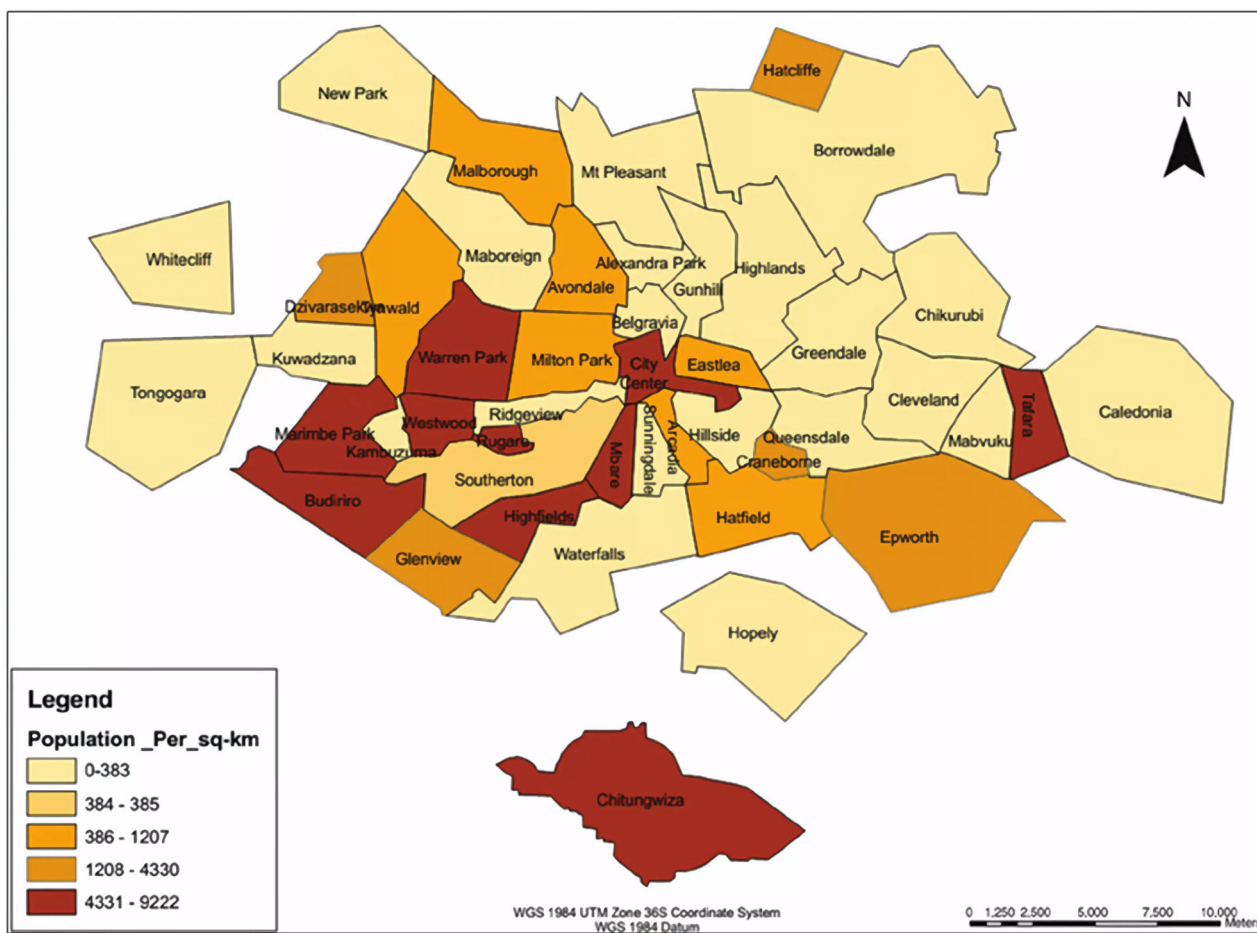


Fig. 2 Map of suburbs in Harare as well as the population densities from the respective suburbs. This figure is not covered by the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. Reproduced with permission of Transactions of the Royal Society of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene; copyright © Transactions of the Royal Society of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene, all rights reserved.

(Mlambo 2010). In essence, the land market was controlled by the Europeans who could access and own land within the city and in the urban periphery. On the other hand, Harare was also originally developed and planned based on the garden city concept, which resulted in Harare being surrounded by a green belt constituting farmland and natural open spaces such as wetlands (Matamanda and Chirisa, 2014). The form of the city is thus attributed to this spatial segregation, as seen in Fig. 2, where the settlers occupied the northern parts of Harare with larger plot sizes, while the Africans were eventually concentrated in the southern and western suburbs with smaller plot sizes creating high population density in the areas.

During the colonial era, the government maintained two broad land use categories: state and freehold land. State land was mainly characterised by communal lands, which accommodated the indigenous people, while urban land was categorised under freehold land owned mainly by the European settlers and a few Africans who possessed title deeds (Bond, 1993). The implication was that the settlers had more privilege regarding land issues and access to transact on land, which was not the same as the indigenous people who could only own land in the rural areas. It emerged that land in the vicinity of Harare was thus within the hands of the Europeans and this inequality in land access was inherited at independence in 1980 (Matamanda, 2020). Blacks were not allowed to own any property in urban areas, and they only resided in rented accommodations owned by the local authority (Bond, 1993). In this regard, the urban land market existed as an arena for the white settlers and a few Blacks.

Peri-urban land reform processes in Harare. At independence in 1980, the government of Zimbabwe sought to redress the colonial injustices in land access and use by redistributing the land to landless indigenous people (Meredith, 2002). Ultimately, the land reform process that unfolded in the country fell into two phases. The first phase was guided by the Lancaster House Agreement signed in December 1979 (Davidow, 2019). The Agreement made provisions for the first phase of the country's land reform as it involved the willing-buyer-willing-seller clause through which the settlers could voluntarily sell freehold land to the government, which would then redistribute it to the landless Africans (Lewis, 1980). The British government committed to funding the purchasing of the land from the willing sellers.

During this first phase of the land reform informed by the Lancaster House Agreement, the land market was formal as it was characterised by a freehold system inherited from the colonial era. Land transactions were regulated through the constitution and protected by the courts as individual rights to land were upheld. In section 8 of the Land Acquisition Act of 1992, the government was committed to serving any landowner with an "occupation order" and proceeded to compensate the landowner accordingly, as the land would become state property. Such land would then be redistributed to those in need of land and title deeds or leases were given to the beneficiaries of such land. These "occupation orders" were prominent in rural areas and rarely in urban areas such as Harare. In an interview with one of the key informants (an academic), they highlighted that 'the initial agreement could not be considered as land reform. It simply sought to perpetuate colonial segregation. We never saw any changes in land reform, particularly in the urban areas. At this stage, the land reform did not affect the urban land market much. An official from the DPP also indicated that all land transactions in the city were based on monetary exchange, and state authorities usually intervened in such transactions. Hence, tenure and rights were clearly defined, and it was rare to have conflicts around land rights. The urban land market remained lucrative, with the City of Harare

benefiting from capital gains tax on land sales and City of Harare was acquiring farms from private owners for urban development. In this regard, another respondent commented that:

The urban land market was very lucrative, and the city of Harare could also monitor the land transactions as well as benefit from capital gains tax when the land was sold. Conflicts around land rights were very rare.

Thus, the land somehow provided a form of revenue for the local authority owing to the regularisation and formalisation of the urban land market that prevailed. However, shortcomings of the perpetuation of the colonial imbalances during the first phase of the land reform program were identified by some respondents. One of the respondents, an official from the DPP, indicated that:

Upon gaining her independence, Zimbabwe inherited the British colonial legal system, where land in the urban areas remained in the hands of the colonial settlers. Simply put, there was a perpetuation of the colonial imbalances in that the rights to land ownership remained formal as the landowners had entitlement to the land through the titles they had. Any transactions in the land were thus through the willingness of the landowner to sell the land.

The major flaw with the first phase of the land reform program was that there was no compulsion on the white farmers to sell their land; hence, it was largely the marginal land which was sold and considering that Harare was situated in a viable agricultural region few commercial farmers were willing to sell their land. The farmers were also speculative about urban development; hence they anticipated more returns from the land. A major issue highlighted by Matondi (2012) is that a private land market existed through which land transactions were facilitated mainly among the whites and a few political elites. This system favoured these elites only, who simply made the market exclusive such that they remained the only ones who could exchange land on the market. The existence of a few elites is also explained by Meredith (2002), who notes that a new elite emerged and these controlled resource use and allocation, which also extends to land. Some proponents argue that for this reason, the compulsory land acquisition law was eventually affected and culminated in the second phase of the land reform in Zimbabwe (Matondi, 2012).

The FTLRP and implications for peri-urban land markets in the context of Harare. The second phase of peri-urban land reform commenced in the early 2000s. Peri-urban land reform program was a component of Zimbabwe's broader Fast Track Land Reform Program. Peri-urban land reform program focused on addressing the issue of land ownership and distribution in peri-urban areas, which are the transitional zones between urban and rural areas. Although the broader land reform program was contested by the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) political party, then-President RG Mugabe went on to launch the land reform that came to be popularly referred to as the FTLRP. The FTLRP was mainly a response to the defeat of Mugabe's draft constitution, which sought to allow land expropriation without compensation (Mills et al. 2019: 183). The draft constitution was mainly opposed by the MDC and various other constituent members, such as Commercial Farmers' Union. A key informant, who is a war veteran, indicated that:

The FTLRP was a revolution because we [war veterans] fought for the land and were not benefitting from it. Most of us [war vets] were renting in urban areas, and with the rising cost of living, the comrades sought to have their own residential plots. This also triggered the land reform as the war vets pressurised the President.

The sentiments of this respondent show how the pressure from the war veterans also fuelled the FTLRP. For this reason, the war veterans were at the forefront of the farm invasions. Using his presidential powers, President Mugabe passed a constitutional amendment in April 2000 that override the provisions of section 8 of the Land Acquisition Act of 1992. Subsequently, the right to full compensation for land was removed to serve for improvements made to the land (Madhuku, 2004). Several commercial farms were enlisted for compulsory redistribution. Consequently, the Fast Track Land Reform Program had significant implications for urban land markets, particularly in the context of Harare. The implications are discussed in the following subsections.

Disregard of the law and illegal occupation of land. Despite the existence of some form of legislation that specified the farms to be occupied, there was no legal backing for the actual land allocation which unfolded. The ministers and other high-level officials provided offer letters to some of the occupiers, yet no guidelines informed the occupations. In other instances, some individuals occupied some of the peri-urban farms without any documentation (Matondi, 2012). As a result, even some farms that were not enlisted were eventually occupied by illegal settlers. During this period, many peri-urban farms around Harare, such as Hopley Farm, Caledonia, WhiteCliff, and Tongogara, were occupied illegally by settlers, including homeless individuals and war veterans (see Fig. 2). Notably, farms like Saturday Retreat and Odar Farm now Ushewekunze and Southlea Park respectively also became focal points of occupations (Muchadenyika, 2020). The strategic location of Saturday Retreat and Odar Farm made them attractive sites for both the government, land barons and informal settlers. War veterans, homeless individuals, and other marginalized groups occupied the land, setting up temporary structures and cultivating small plots. The occupations were characterized by similar patterns of state support and political maneuvering, with the government using the land allocations to secure political loyalty. This was part of ZANU-PF's strategy to gain support in urban areas, with Mugabe retaining control over all land to solidify his power (Mills et al. 2019). The occupations and subsequent informal settlement development at these farms exemplify the direct impact of the FTLRP on peri-urban land markets, illustrating the tensions between planned urban development and spontaneous settlement driven by land reform policies.

With the support of law enforcement agencies, the occupiers used physical violence at times to intimidate white farmers. This was mainly backed by political pressure where ZANU-PF sought to gain majority support in urban areas. Mills et al. (2019) explained that through the FTLRP, Mugabe retained ownership of all the land by keeping everyone beholden to the state (with all land vested in the president) solidifying and tightening his grip on power. In essence, the state executed and engineered the land reform program through disregard for the law (Scoones, 2018). War veterans and the military played a crucial role in its execution. Subsequently, farm invasions were affected, and land was grabbed from the white commercial farmers without compensation.

The emergence of multiple competing claims over peri-urban land. The FTLRP brought with it several players who emerged on the land market disrupting the formal land market system that had always existed in Harare. The war veterans were at the forefront of the land grabs that occurred in the early 2000s. These included a diverse group of individuals like Government Ministers and other officials from the army and police, for

example, former chief police officer Augustine Chihuri. The political elites were also key players as they used political powers to grab land in and around Harare. The Ministry of local government, public works and national housing, Ministry of Lands and Harare City Council were among the players who tried to ensure the formal operation of the land market system. However, in the process, their efforts could not result in the formal operation of the land market system as planned. In other instances, the establishment of housing cooperatives led to conflicts with established landowners or developers who felt threatened by the influx of new housing developments in their area. This led to resistance to the establishment of housing cooperatives and increased opposition to land reform programs more broadly. The land reform program exacerbated social and political tensions in Harare peri urban and other smaller towns (Scoones, 2018). The polarization between supporters and opponents of the ruling party intensified, leading to protests, political violence, and human rights abuses. These dynamics further hampered efforts for inclusive and sustainable urban development.

Rise in Informal Settlements and Urban Sprawl. The FTLRP led to a surge in rural-to-urban migration as displaced individuals sought alternative livelihoods in cities. The influx of people, combined with limited affordable housing options, resulted in the growth of informal settlements and slums on the outskirts of Harare (Bhanye, 2023b). These settlements often lack basic infrastructure, services, and formal land tenure, leading to challenges in urban planning and provision of services. A city of Harare official had this to say:

Urban sprawl and the rapid expansion of informal settlements is straining the existing urban infrastructure in Harare. Local authorities are struggling to provide basic services such as water, sanitation, electricity, and transportation to these areas. The unplanned growth is also impeding the development of new infrastructure projects, as land disputes and uncertainties are complicating investment decisions.

Figure 3 shows Hopley Farm, one of the popular informal settlements that mushroomed as a result of the haphazard peri-urban land reforms in Harare.

The rapid and chaotic nature of the land reform program also highlighted deficiencies in governance and urban planning systems especially in Harare. Weak enforcement of zoning regulations by local authorities, lack of transparency in land allocation processes, and corruption undermined efforts to manage urban growth in peri-urban areas effectively and ensuring equitable access to land for settlement.

The emergence of land barons and informal peri-urban land transactions. Following the FTLRP, political elites grabbed the majority of the farms and land in Harare peri-urban. In peri-urban areas like Harare South, Caledonia and Whitecliff, prominent political figures grabbed farms and swindled poor home seekers (Matamanda, 2020). The result was the informalisation of the Harare urban land market, characterised by bogus transactions with land being sold to individuals who did not receive any certificates for it. An official from the City of Harare commented that:

The FTLRP has resulted in the City of Harare losing large tracts of land to politicians as well as individuals who now parcel out the land to landless individuals. The irony is that individuals pay for the land and, in most instances, do not have any documentation showing entitlement to the land.



Fig. 3 Emerging informal settlements in Harare peri-urban (Hopely Farm). Source: Authors.

Land transactions were fuelled by political elites- land barons- most of whom were leaders of cooperative housing movements. In Harare peri-urban, some land seekers have relied on land parcelled through these land barons owned by political party bigwigs and government bureaucrats. In Harare, land barons led to the rampant building of houses illegally on schools and state land without authorisation. People in known areas, such as Harare South, North and East, have been illegally allocated residential stands on state land by land barons who are apron tied to powerful parliamentarians (Chirisa et al. 2014). This cartel of land grabbers gets away with this for a long time because they usually have immense influence and so much power that they are virtually untouchable, as one academic revealed.

The ruling party ZANU-PF, also facilitate land access among settlers in Harare peri-urban. According to Muchadenyika (2015), ZANU-PF uses peri-urban farms grabbed during the Fast Track Land Reform Program to bolster its waning support in urban constituencies. Through ZANU-PF-aligned cooperatives and land barons, the party is a major player in deciding who had access to land for housing. One key informant narrated:

Land access in these peri-urban areas is all about political connections. To be precise, the land transactions in Harare peri-urban are mainly based on political patronage. At election time, those who are given land (mostly the urban poor) repay through voting for the ruling party.

During the study, other key informants also confirmed that it is mainly during election times that some politicians give people land to settle without liaising with the council. One of the City council officials highlighted that ‘oftentimes, local authority powers get undermined in land governance processes because of fear of being at loggerheads with politicians.’ Consequently, the City of Harare has been losing significant potential revenue from land transactions. This is also explained by the fact that most people are now hesitant to invest in urban land, which is deemed risky, especially if one considers the evictions and demolitions the government sometimes unleashes (Fig. 4). The result has been a crippling and dysfunctional urban land market in Harare (Mhetu, 2018).

On the other hand, other land seekers use the opposition party, Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) now Citizens Coalition for Change (CCC) which uses its majority urban council control of urban areas (Matamanda et al. 2024; Muchadenyika, 2015). With majority control of the urban councils, the MDC was able to allocate land to land seekers in a somewhat transparent

and fair manner. However, the MDC’s control of urban councils has not been without its challenges. The party has had to navigate a difficult political climate, with the ruling ZANU-PF party often attempting to undermine its authority through the powers of the Ministry of Local Government.

Positive implications of the peri-urban land reform program.

While the FTLRP in Harare peri-urban faced significant challenges and criticisms, it had its own positive implications. The land reform program addressed the historical spatial injustices by providing secure land tenure to low-income families living in informal settlements on the outskirts of urban areas. In Harare peri-urban, access to land was at times facilitated by housing cooperatives, which are community-based organisations that facilitate access to land and housing for their members. A key informant from the city of Harare had this to say:

One of the main implications of the peri-urban land reform program in Harare, Zimbabwe was their implications on the urban land markets. By providing secure land tenure to low-income families, the land reform increased the supply of land available for housing, leading to a decrease in the price of land in urban areas. This made housing more affordable for low-income families and increased the availability of affordable housing options in the city.

A war veteran in peri-urban Hopely Farm also narrated how the land reform program helped to address the historical injustices of land distribution and provided access to land for housing for the urban poor and landless people in Harare peri-urban. The war veteran had this to say:

The land reform program helped to address historical injustices of land distribution. It provided access to land for housing for the urban poor and landless people in peri-urban areas. Although the program had its challenges, it also had some successes, and it has the potential to contribute to sustainable urban development and poverty reduction in Harare peri-urban.

Another key informant, a war veteran in Caledonia also applauded how the land reform program increased land ownership and access for poor urbanites. He particularly emphasized how beyond facilitating access to land for housing, the land reform encouraged small-scale farming initiatives within urban areas, contributing to food security.



Fig. 4 Demolitions of houses built on illegal land in Harare, Zimbabwe. This figure is not covered by the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. Reproduced with permission of NewsZimbabwe; copyright © NewsZimbabwe, all rights reserved.

The program had some successes, including providing land for urban agriculture, providing food security, and reducing poverty and unemployment. The program has also empowered poor urbanites who now have access to land and are now self-sufficient. The program has also contributed to the government's efforts to promote sustainable urban development by providing land for housing for the urban poor.

Thus, although complex and controversial, the peri-urban land reform had its successes and positive implications for peri-urban land markets in Harare. However, regardless of the benefits of the peri-urban land reform program, the implications on peri-urban land markets are far more outweighing and complex.

Discussion

The foregoing findings presented the implications of land reforms and urban land markets in Harare. Zimbabwe has a colonial legacy of segregation and inequality in access to land among the settlers and the indigenous people. Such disparities have been responsible for the increase in the demand for urban land, which has also been exacerbated by the blossoming urban populations creating a huge demand for urban land. This, among other factors, triggered the implementation of the FTLRP. The FTLRP and, specifically, peri-urban land reform program had significant implications for the urban land market in Harare, Zimbabwe. While land reform brought promises of reducing poverty and inequalities and land supply to the disadvantaged, there was a mismatch between the types and pricing of housing that are available in the market on the one hand and the needs and affordability levels of a large section of the needy on the other hand, especially the low to middle-income earners. Peri-urban land reform also led to conflicts with established landowners and developers, encouraged urban sprawl, and challenged existing power structures and political systems.

Further, peri-urban land also remained in the hands of a few elites who benefited through the Land Reform Program at the expense of the general population. The elites, land barons and tightly organised syndicates which make huge profits out of the housing needs of low-income groups. Especially in the case of public land, local administrators, police officers, and/or military personnel almost invariably have a hand in the syndicates – as either active members or recipients of bribes. At the end, the urban poor continue to be marginalised on the land market as the powerful politicians and elites continue to dominate the processes in this market. Further, the ruling party ZANU-PF continues to use land as 'bait' in exchange for election votes. Thus, access to land becomes part of distributive politics and clientelism in the housing of urban low-income groups (Chirisa et al. 2015). There

is also some ambiguity regarding the implementation of the land reform program in the case of Harare which has resulted in unclear or lack of transparency and inclusivity in how land earmarked for redistribution is communicated to the public. Overall, the demand for land exceeds the supply such that the land market is affected by increasing demand for land which pushes up the land prices, regardless of the factors indicated by Alonso (1960), that is, location and plot size.

The approaches to the peri-urban land reform that were launched in Zimbabwe resulted in the informalisation of the urban land market. This has had far-reaching implications to coherent urban planning and development in cities (Muchadenyika, 2015). In fact, the program reversed planning procedures of layout planning, surveying, servicing and occupation (Muchadenyika and Williams, 2017). In other words, the land reform program transgressed Zimbabwe's bureaucratized and technocratic planning system (Chakwizira, 2021). Due to the chaotic way the FTLRP was executed, and the politics associated with it, returning to the use of rational planning frameworks faced enormous opposition (Marongwe et al. 2011). Planners became enmeshed between adhering to planning principles and the government's radical objective of the land reform. In a way, town planning was set aside, as it became difficult to stand in the way of the FTLRP with logical arguments without being a victim of harassment both professionally and physically (Matamanda et al. 2024). The wilful disregard for planning is evidenced by the lack of planning, infrastructure and basic services in most rural, urban and peri-urban settlements which developed during and after the land reform program (Matondi, 2012; Muchadenyika and Williams, 2017).

However, apart from the patronage approach in which the peri-urban land reform was implemented in Zimbabwe, other factors also fuelled informal land markets. The volatile macro-economic environment is one key factor. Zimbabwe has experienced significant economic challenges in recent years, including high levels of unemployment, inflation, and a lack of affordable housing. These economic factors fuelled the growth of informal land markets as people looked for ways to secure land for housing and other economic activities. The rapid population growth in urban areas also increased the demand for housing, and informal land markets have emerged to meet this demand. Zimbabwean local authorities have also experienced weak land administration and governance for some time. The lack of effective land administration and governance systems also made it difficult for the government to manage land allocation in peri-urban areas. This created opportunities for informal land markets to emerge as people sought to bypass the formal land allocation processes. In other instances, traditional land allocation systems also contributed to the growth of informal land markets. For example, in

some areas, traditional leaders sell land to outsiders without going through formal processes, leading to the development of informal land markets (Bhanye, 2024).

Conclusion

The ushering in of democratic governments in post-colonial Africa was concomitant with land reform policies and programs aimed to redress the colonial socio-spatial inequalities in land access and ownership. However, because land is a highly contested resource in urban and peri-urban areas, there is evidence of inconsistencies in the implementation of land reform programs, consequently influencing urban land markets. The dilemma of land reform policies in Southern Africa is linked to their formulation and implementation in contested political landscapes. In these landscapes, power and politics complicate the success of urban planning processes aimed at transforming land markets in light of urban land reforms. In urban areas, this trilogy of planning, power and politics plays a significant role in influencing the nature and characteristics of the urban land markets.

The findings presented in this paper highlight that the land reform program brought about positive changes in terms of increasing land access for previously marginalised groups, they have also resulted in unintended consequences such as the proliferation of informal land transactions, multiple and competing claims over land, increased urban sprawl and mushrooming of informal settlements, and duping of unsuspecting poor urbanites by land barons. The insights gleaned from the in-depth analysis of Harare's peri-urban land reform programs offer valuable guidance for other African countries contemplating the land reform or that have done similar initiatives like South Africa, Kenya, Ghana, Tanzania, and Nigeria. In these African countries challenges such as tenure insecurity, inefficient land markets, and informal settlements also persist in the peri-urban areas. By taking into account the insights from the case study of Harare presented in this paper, policymakers in other African countries can make informed decisions that ensure that land reform programs contribute to the development of robust urban land markets without inadvertently promoting the informalization of settlements.

Overall, the paper makes a valuable contribution to the growing literature on land reforms and peri-urban development in Africa demonstrating the complex and multidimensional implications of land reform programs on peri-urban land markets. The distortion of urban land markets by politically driven land reform processes negatively affects sustainable urban and peri-urban development. Thus, current and future urban and peri-urban land governance processes need to strike a balance between planning, power and politics to ensure inclusive and sustainable urban land markets, as opposed to informal land markets driven only by politics. The nexus between planning, power and politics should not compromise the functionality of the land markets, which is a critical component of sustainable and inclusive urban development. Land should be considered as an economic tool that can transform the local economy of the cities, not as a means to advance political agendas for politicians.

Data availability

Some of the missing data that underlie the findings of this study are not publicly available due to concerns regarding the protection of participant privacy. The restrictions on data access are in accordance with the ethical guidelines and privacy regulations governing research on people on the margins. However, a de-identified subset or summary data may be made available upon request from the authors and in compliance with applicable data protection regulations.

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Author contributions

The authors collaboratively contributed to the paper as follows: 1. Conceptualization, data collection, data analysis, writing - original draft, review and editing. 2. Conceptualization, data collection, data analysis, writing - original draft, review and editing. 3. Conceptualization, data analysis, writing - original draft. 4. Conceptualization, data collection, data analysis, writing - original draft.

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

Ethical approval

The Ethical Committee from the University of the Free State granted ethical approval to conduct this study (approval number UFS-HSD2020/1704/192) in 2020.

Informed consent

All participants provided written informed consent before inclusion in the study. The process included a clear explanation of the study, potential risks, benefits, and the voluntary nature of participation.

Additional information

Supplementary information The online version contains supplementary material available at <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-024-03500-9>.

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