



## REGISTERING RURAL RIGHTS: VILLAGE LAND TITLING IN TANZANIA, 2008-2017

### BACKGROUND

In the early 2000s, Tanzania struggled to protect the land rights of the 75% of its citizens who lived in rural areas. Few of these residents had formal title to their land. Rapid population growth and rising investment in commercial agriculture increased the demand for land and created the potential for violent conflict. A Village Land Act, enacted in 2001, authorized new forms of occupancy certificates to register both communal land and individual rights within such areas.

The Ministry of Lands, Housing and Human Settlements Development struggled to implement the new law, however. The Act created a highly decentralized system for registering rural lands and gave individual villages the power to manage the registration process. But elected local councils were often unaware of their responsibilities and lacked the technical know-how to carry out village surveys. Further, the central government agencies that played a role saw themselves only as policy makers, not implementers, and had neither the financial resources nor the coordination capacity to assist.

### REFORM STRATEGY

In 2004, officials from the lands ministry in partnership with the World Bank and other donors successfully piloted the country's first titling project in the western Mbozi district, where 158 villages and more than 1,000 individuals received titles to their land. Building on lessons from the pilot, the government passed a Land Use Planning Act and drew up a strategic plan to title rural land throughout the country. Among other things, the new approach required communities to develop land use plans before they could receive occupancy certificates and enabled technical teams to survey all parcels within a village at the same time, instead of on individual demand.

The land ministry took on responsibility for scaling the project with the help of the recently

### KEY ISSUES

- **Strengthening rural tenure security**
- **Surveying and issuing individual and communal land titles**
- **Decentralizing land administration**

established a Property and Business Formalization Program (known by its Kiswahili acronym Mkurabita), a program the president's office developed in conjunction with Peruvian economist Hernando de Soto. A diagnostic report from Mkurabita found that 89% of land in the country was not formally titled, and projected that mass registration would generate large economic benefits by enabling people to obtain credit.

The final trigger for launching large-scale titling projects came in 2008, when global markets for biofuels and other commodities crashed. The promised economic benefits of major commercial investments in agricultural land failed to materialize and with conflicts over land escalating, the government had to act.

### ACTIONS TAKEN

Starting in 2008, Mkurabita and the lands ministry launched parallel titling projects throughout many of the country's 169 districts. They prioritized sites based on a combination of local demand for titling, as well as agricultural potential and the likelihood of future land conflicts.

The first step was to work with the survey and mapping department of the national lands ministry to make sure that each village in the selected district obtained a Certificate of Village Land. Together with leaders from neighboring communities, surveyors walked the boundaries of village lands and uploaded the GPS coordinates to a national database. The resulting Certificate of Village Land officially registered the village's outer boundaries.

Once the locally elected government—known as a village council—had a Certificate of Village Land, it could begin the process of issuing individual titles to residents. With training and assistance from national officials, villagers elected a 10-member village adjudication committee (four of whom had to be women) to oversee the surveying process. The committee drew up a village land use plan that outlined which areas could be individually titled, and proposed a set of bylaws for managing shared resources. The land use plan and bylaws had to be endorsed through a community-wide vote.

Officials assisting rural communities ensured that both villages and district land offices had the necessary equipment, such as printers and secure rooms, to create and store title documents. They also employed professional surveyors to map individual parcels. To alleviate the high cost of surveying rural land, a USAID-funded program began experimenting in 2014 with a mobile software application to drive down the cost of rural surveys.

When neighbors disagreed on borders, members of the adjudication committee worked to find solutions on the spot. If disputes persisted, the committee referred the parties to recently established land tribunals. Once community members endorsed the survey results, district land officers worked with

the village council to print, sign and issue the occupancy certificates.

On the pastoral lands of the Maasai in northern Tanzania, the local NGO Ujamaa Community Resource Team lobbied the ministry to issue communal occupancy certificates as well. After the government finally agreed, in 2011, the Ujamaa team helped villages navigate the process to secure the certificates and set up grazing rules and oversight committees to protect communal pastoral areas.

## RESULTS

By early 2017, about 11,000 out of Tanzania's estimated 12,500 villages had obtained Certificates of Village Land, and 1,640 had adopted land use plans. Around 320,000 rural citizens had also secured their individual parcels by obtaining occupancy certificates, while 36 communal certificates registered over 400,000 hectares of pastoral land.

Much work remained to be done, however. The 320,000 occupancy certificates accounted for only about 5.5% of the country's rural population. Nonetheless, rural land titling was firmly on the agenda. The government publicly pledged to draw up land use plans for an additional 7,500 villages and issue a further 2.5 million land certificates by 2020.

## LESSONS LEARNED

- **Defining national and local roles.** A decentralized approach to land administration empowers local communities, but it is crucial to establish a clear role for the national government in coordinating, building local government capacity to engage in land titling.
- **Simplifying the process.** Tanzania's system for registering rural lands required approvals from officials at several levels. The complex land framework created by the Village Land Act was also expensive and slow. Simplifying the requirements for issuing occupancy certificates would enable elected village governments to play a more proactive role in the process and reduce costs.
- **Easing registration with mobile technology.** The USAID-funded Mobile Application to Secure Tenure (MAST) project showed promise in driving down costs and speeding up processing times for issuing occupancy certificates. Local survey teams used a mobile application to map parcels and transmitted all the required information to the district office.
- **Adjusting to land use patterns.** Individual occupancy certificates were not suitable for pastoral communities' large, shared grazing lands. Adapting the approach to fit the pastoral context illustrated the importance of building registration systems that recognize various types of rights.

---

Innovations for Successful Societies (ISS) is a program of the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs: ISS is a resource for reform leaders, policy makers and scholars interested in building stronger public institutions in challenging contexts. ISS interviews, case studies and cross-cutting analysis help share experience and insight across boundaries. Visit the ISS website, follow [ISS on Twitter \(@PrincetonISS\)](#), find [ISS on Facebook](#), [join the ISS mailing list](#), and [send your feedback](#). All materials are available free of charge for non-commercial use.