

An Alphabet Soup of Acronyms and Aspirations: Is Land Administration losing its meaning in the age of modernity?

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SUMMARY

The paper discusses the danger of Land Administration losing its essence to acronyms and aspirations in the age of modernity. The increasing use of the language of Sustainable Development Goals and that of their UN-parents in a dizzy array of acronyms and buzzwords is threatening both common sense and intellectual rigour. When land administration emerged as a serious field of governance in the last decades of the twentieth century, a primary goal was to provide a unified governance framework to prevent ‘silos’ of regulation and encapsulate the multi-disciplinary nature of land governance in the modern era. It was largely a conceptual framework to guide policy and implementation and to promote integration. The early theoretical framings were unambiguous in grounding land administration in land information systems, and they never strayed from the centrality of the cadastre. In the twenty-first century, land activists and NGOs in the global south pushed back, citing lack of inclusivity of these definitions given that in most of the global south, particularly Africa, the conventional cadastre is extremely limited. The cadastre was understood to be land parcels linked to land registers with unified government authority over them. Attempts to reorientate land administration towards cadastral-light realities have led to burgeoning field of ideas and technical tools centering around ‘social tenure’ rather than cadastral boundaries. However, land administration without the attributes of the cadastre is extremely challenging. Legal pluralism and diverse forms of localised authority over land tenure and land use management defies its original meaning. Instead of confronting this central challenge, much of the messaging of the new approaches to land administration in post-colonial contexts tends to gloss over it by preaching what land administration ‘should be’ and what miracles it can perform, even ending poverty, reproducing the values of the global north whilst at the same time contradicting them. The result is profound ambiguity. By mouthing volleys of acronyms, we seem to be trying to talk the aspirations into reality. The author argues that land administration practitioners have still not found a way of practically addressing the realities of diverse cultural and customary practices of land ownership

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and use that are a direct challenge to older core themes and concepts of land administration that were and are relevant to developed economies with more singular property systems. We can start by using plain language and rigorous research that reveal and describe the actual realities rather than gloss over them by using acronyms, buzzwords and righteous indignation.

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