



Use and users of municipal commonage around three small towns in the Eastern Cape, South Africa

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 23 November 2009

Received in revised form

12 October 2010

Accepted 1 November 2010

Available online 19 January 2011

Keywords:

Commonages

Fuelwood

South Africa

Users

Wealth

ABSTRACT

Municipal commonages surround many small towns throughout South Africa, and are an integral component of the national land reform programme. But little is known about their extent, use or value, and most appear to have limited or no management or investment. This paper reports on a survey of randomly selected households in three small towns in the Eastern Cape to ascertain the extent and purpose of use of municipal commonages. Between 27% and 70% of urban households used commonage depending on site. Key resources used were fuelwood, medicinal plants, and grazing of livestock. Typically, commonage using households were poorer and less educated than other urban residents, although the profile of users is unique for each town. Given the extensive use of commonage resources, and their contribution to the livelihoods of the poor, local municipalities need to develop and implement sound management strategies that account for all users of commonages, rather than the oft encountered focus on livestock owners and production.

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1. Introduction

The twentieth century saw South Africa's colonial and later apartheid governments restrict black people from accessing land (Bradstock, 2006). The main aim of the government's strategy was to provide a supply of cheap labour for the expanding mining sector, as well as the white commercial farming sector (Cousins, 2007). This policy approach by the former apartheid government led to a highly skewed racial distribution of land rights and development; it threatened livelihoods and caused a tainted quality of life for the bulk of people in South Africa (Geach and Peart, 2000). The Native Lands Act of 1913 was perhaps the most discriminatory legislation in South Africa. This law allowed black people to set up farming enterprises only on the Native Reserves (Bradstock, 2006). The Act also denied black people the right to purchase land from whites and from entering into any share-cropping arrangements with them (Adams et al., 2000). After coming into power in 1994, the newly democratically elected African National Congress (ANC) government was faced with an enormous task of redressing the inequitable and racialised pattern of land rights passed on from the colonial and apartheid past (May and Lahiff, 2007).

According to May and Lahiff (2007), land reform aims to give local people access to land, create livelihood opportunities and

develop the local economy. The benefactors of land redistribution include the poor and previously disadvantaged, labour tenants, new entrants to agriculture, women and farm workers (Benseler, 2003; Ntsebeza and Hall, 2007). There is currently an underlying assumption that providing land to the above-mentioned beneficiaries will supply them with beneficial assets, which can be used profitably to enhance their livelihoods (Andrew et al., 2003a).

In South Africa municipal commonage historically referred to land found adjacent to small towns that was granted by the state or church for the use and benefit of the town's poor residents (Anderson and Pienaar, 2004; Ingle, 2006). This land was granted to municipalities at the time of the formal establishment of towns during the 1800s (Anderson and Pienaar, 2004). In the colonial and apartheid past, commonages were granted to white residents for keeping livestock; this enhanced their livelihoods through benefits such as meat, milk and draught power (Atkinson, 2005; Atkinson and Buscher, 2006; Atkinson, 2007a). However, from the 1950s onwards municipalities moved away from the 'local resident' system due to a lack of interest in small-scale agriculture by the white urban sector (Atkinson and Benseler, 2004). Thus, they leased commonage to commercial farmers at market prices (Anderson and Pienaar, 2004; Atkinson and Benseler, 2004). This benefited the municipalities because it allowed them to make an income from their commonages (Benseler, 2003). However, in 1996 municipalities started terminating their leases with commercial farmers, because the new democratic government needed land for the poor (Atkinson and Buscher, 2006).

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In addition to this historical commonage, in some towns more land was bought to increase the size of commonages. New commonage refers to land purchased by the Department of Land Affairs (DLA) (Act 126) after 1994 as part of South Africa's Land Reform Programme (LRP) (Anderson and Pienaar, 2004). After being purchased, the land is transferred to municipalities free of charge (Anderson and Pienaar, 2003). It must then be allocated to emergent farmers from disadvantaged backgrounds so that they can practise farming with a view to improve their standard of living (Buso, 2003).

Municipal commonage comprises a significant land area (Atkinson, 2007a, b). Exact figures are, however, unknown. Municipalities own a considerable amount of agricultural land primarily in rural towns in the Western Cape, Eastern Cape and Northern Cape provinces of South Africa (Atkinson, 2007a, b). The size of commonage land differs between municipalities. Buso (2003) reported that, in the Free State, municipal commonages ranged in size from 83 ha to 29 701 ha per town. There are no official records of the size of commonage in the Eastern and Western Cape; however, Buso's (2003) survey estimated that for the Free State there are at least 112 795 ha of commonage (equating to just under 1% of the province area). Benseler (2003) found that in the Northern Cape there are an estimated 367 871 ha of commonage plus another 1.2 million hectares of Namaqualand "Act 9" land (also considered as commonage); totalling an estimated 1.64 million ha (Pienaar and May, 2003), and equating to 4.5% of the total area of the province. When considering the scale of commonage in South Africa one realises the importance of sound planning and effective management for this land (Ingle, 2006).

1.1. Municipal commonage as a component of land reform

Municipal commonage was identified as a pillar of the LRP by the DLA (1997) because it "is public land which does not need to be acquired, there is an existing institution which can manage the land, and needy residents live next-door." The significance of commonage in the redistribution programme is evident in the fact that, up until 2003, the largest transfer of land from any one programme within the greater land redistribution programme was that of commonage (Anderson and Pienaar, 2003). However, this transfer was not in favour of ownership by black farmers directly but instead to municipalities which were required to use this land for black farmers. This parallels other strands of the LRP where individual titling was avoided for the former rural communal areas (Cousins, 2007).

The LRP has supported municipalities financially, which in turn has helped them convert their municipal commonages into a livelihood option for previously disadvantaged people (Atkinson and Benseler, 2004; Atkinson, 2005, 2007a). Land reform is an integral part of government policy, driven politically through land claims, as well as land reform pressures in countries such as Zimbabwe (Benseler, 2003; Atkinson, 2005, 2007a). There is, however, a need for it to be executed swiftly, which in so doing places a lot of pressure on municipalities to make their commonages progressively more available to emergent farmers (Benseler, 2003; Atkinson, 2005, 2007a). In light of the significant poverty on small towns of the province (Nel, 1999), township residents are also placing pressure on municipalities to promote pro-poor commonage projects, which has added to the need for land reform haste (Atkinson, 2005, 2007a).

1.2. Urban growth and municipal commonage

A deepening social and economic crisis in the rural areas, fuelled by the decrease of formal sector employment, the devastation of HIV/AIDS, and the ongoing evictions from farms is accelerating the movement of rural people to towns and cities resulting in rapid

urban growth (Nel, 1999; Lahiff, 2001; Rogerson, 2006). The ten years from 1988 until 1998 saw 20% (140 000 labourers) of the agricultural labour force lose their jobs, while from 1996 to 2001, South Africa's rural population declined from 44.9% to 42.5% (Simbi and Aliber, 2000; StatsSA, 2001).

The majority of evicted farm workers are drifting to nearby towns (Atkinson, 2005, 2007a; Palmer, 2005). These new urban residents frequently live in severe poverty (Nel, 2005; Thornton, 2008). However, many have some agricultural skills and thus attempt, or aspire, to farm on municipal commonage to maintain their livelihoods and contribute to their increased need for cash by virtue of now residing in an urban area (Atkinson, 2005, 2007a; Atkinson and Buscher, 2006). This will inevitably lead to an increase in demand for municipal commonage for agricultural purposes.

The two primary aims of municipal commonage are: (1) providing access to land for supplementing income (subsistence user system), and (2) as a stepping stone for emergent farmers (emergent farmer system) (DLA, 2002). This involves improving people's access to municipal land primarily for grazing purposes, small-scale production and access to other natural resources. There have also been a handful of endeavours which have attempted to use commonage for other agricultural purposes such as poultry farming or vegetable patches (Anderson and Pienaar, 2003). Nonetheless, it is important to remember that although municipal commonage appears to be rural agricultural land because it is often used for grazing, it has always been owned and controlled by urban authorities (Ingle, 2006). Town planners have established its use over time for the benefit of urban residents, which therefore makes it an urban resource subject to peri-urban practices (Ingle, 2006).

Not only is there inadequate information on the area of land under municipal commonage, there is a paucity of information on its use. Is it being used for farming purposes? Are farmers stepping up to private land ownership after a few years on the commonage? Is it a resource for the urban poor or local elites, or both? Is it available to all urban residents, and if not, who and what proportion actually makes use of it? There has been limited assessment of who uses commonage and for what purposes. It can be used for collecting fuelwood and building materials, running livestock for supplementing income, vegetable production for food security and additional income as well as for recreation, ablution, housing, refuse disposal and even sewage treatment works (Anderson and Pienaar, 2003; Cartwright et al., 2002; Ingle, 2006). The type of land use which is employed on commonage depends on the local conditions. Buso (2003) found that, in the Free State, commonage was being used differently depending on its location; old and new commonage was used predominantly for grazing stock and to some extent crop farming, while the peri-urban municipal land was being used for vegetable garden projects and poultry farming. Thus, municipal commonage is not just urban land; it does serve an agricultural purpose. It also provides the urban poor with access to natural resources allowing them to supplement their livelihoods, although this has hardly been examined and local municipal authorities have no management plans or policies in place to secure this poverty amelioration role. However, there is a very limited focus on this in commonage policy (see DLA, 2002).

Within the context of the above this study sought to determine the proportion of urban households who use municipal commonage and how they compare to non-using households. We did so by means of a household survey administered at three towns in the Eastern Cape, South Africa.

2. Study area

Data collection took place in three different Eastern Cape towns, Bathurst, Fort Beaufort, and Grahamstown. The three sites lie along

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