

Land administration for food security: A research synthesis

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ABSTRACT

Food security remains an ongoing global concern: the challenge of ensuring food availability, access, and utility for all, at all times, is yet to be met. The body of literature relating to food security is growing immensely. Land administrators are part of the discourse. Their arguments are spread disparately across academic and professional publications. The distinction between scientific work and political rhetoric is increasingly blurry: the role of land administration needs to be more concisely articulated. This paper provides a new synthesis on the relationships between land administration and food security. It undertakes a review of land administration literature relating to food security. It aims at crystallizing understandings of how land administration supports, or fails to support, food security at a conceptual level, and also the strategic and operational levels of land administration systems. The relationship between land administration and food security appears to be conceptually agreed upon; however, at operational levels the link is less evident. Conceptually, land administration is argued to deliver (and sometimes not deliver) secure land tenure, support for implementation of agricultural policies, access to credit, less litigation, easier land dealings, land taxation, land inventories, and land transaction controls. This enables (or undermines) subsistence farming, development of local agricultural sectors and markets, credit to access to non-local food markets, farm subsidization, more efficient land utilization, fairer international investments, and national food planning strategies. In general, the examined literature tends to focus on problem identification rather than system design. Additionally, the large amount of positive viewpoints need better validation in many cases. Future work needs to concentrate on examining the utility of land information and geospatial tools for food security, extracting lessons from the land administration systems of developed contexts, and improving the links at an operational level.

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Introduction

Despite more than four decades of international attention, food security remains an issue of global significance (FAO, 1996; Cotula et al., 2009; UN, 2010; HLPE, 2011): there remain global calls to ensure food security in most developing countries. Prominent international advocates include the World Bank, International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), and Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO). In this paper *food security* is defined as “sustained and assured access by all social groups and individuals to food adequate in quantity and quality to meet nutritional needs – to live an active and healthy life” (Dekker, 2001).

Land administration is regularly described as an enabler of food security (c.f. Dekker, 2001, 2006; De Soto, 2003; Deininger, 2003; Bell, 2009; Enemark et al., 2010; IOB, 2011; Bennett et al., 2012). In this paper, *land administration* is defined as the “processes run by government using public- or private sector agencies

related to land tenure, land value, land use and land development” (Williamson et al., 2010). Land administration systems, or cadastres and land registration, are traditionally used for tax or land tenure purposes (Simpson, 1976; Larsson, 1991; UN-ECE, 1996; Dale and McLaughlin, 1999; Williamson and Ting, 2001; Van der Molen, 2002; Williamson et al., 2010). However, they contain a rich data source that could, or should, be utilized in other areas such as the multi-purpose cadastre concept. A number of land administrators have suggested land administration plays a role in food security (c.f. Dekker, 2001, 2003; Bell, 2009; Enemark et al., 2010). To date, there has been little consolidated work synthesizing the different lines of discourse linking land administration to food security: it is spread across numerous journals, books, policy documents, and so on. Consequently, there is a lack of clarity surrounding the role of land administration and the strength of the relationship with food security. Arguably, this impedes informed policy development, land administration design, and further research – at national and international levels.

As such, this paper aims to undertake part of this synthesis. Specifically, it focuses on land administration literature that touches on food security. The objective is to identify how land

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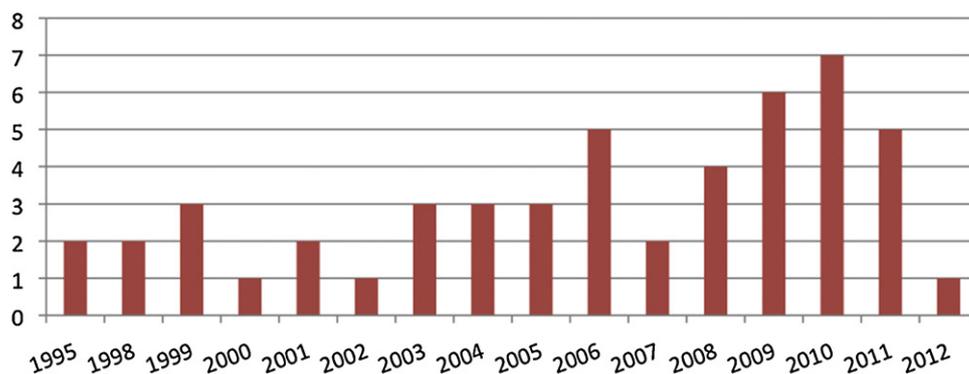


Fig. 1. Quantity of literature by year.

administration perceives itself to support (or fail to support) food security. The intention is to understand the body of literature, to separate mere rhetoric from empirical studies. The methodology utilized is first described: a research synthesis is the primary study tool. Results are then presented and discussed in quantitative and qualitative fashion. The paper concludes with a summary and highlights areas for further research.

Evaluating land administration for food security

The research type utilized for the study was a *research synthesis*. In this type of research, “the researcher imposes a new conceptual framework on a previous data and establishes that this is a better or more unifying explanation” (Rossiter, 2011). This study type is being increasingly adopted within the domain of land administration: the increased amount of published material enables these meta-studies to be undertaken. Much is written on the nature and application of research syntheses in general, and systematic research syntheses more specifically (Cooper, 1998; Hart, 1998; Handoll and Smith, 2003; Bowman, 2007; Alison, 2009). This paper is inspired by such approaches. The limitations of research syntheses are noted upfront. Chalmers et al. (2002) and Cooper (1998) chart the development of the methodology, including attempts to overcome inherent statistical imprecisions, biases, and academic criticisms. Likewise, Denya and Tranfield (2006) articulate the weaknesses of systematic reviews and meta-analyses. Whilst the relatively small domain of land administration enables mitigation of some of these weaknesses, the discussions should be treated as evidence based observations rather than rigorous scientific proofs.

Land administration literature is spread across a range of scientific journals, professional publications, international policy documents, etc. This reality, coupled with limited resources, meant a number of further limitations were placed on the study. First, only documents published between 1995 and 2012 were examined. This was deemed a suitable timeframe as the term ‘land administration’ started gaining wide spread usage during the mid 1990s. Second, the review utilized mainly only scientific repositories – a regrettable but necessary limitation due to resource limitations. The selected databases were: Elsevier Science Direct (1 item); Springer Link (13 items); Geobase (16 items); Sciverse Scopus (31 items), and Thomson-Reuters Web of Science (1 item). However, the recent publications and proceedings websites of UN-FAO, UN-Habitat, and FIG were also examined. Third, the search methodology concentrated only on keyword, title, and abstract searches of each database: searches by author and other attributes were not undertaken. Data on each search was recorded (e.g. time of search, keywords used; number of hits; etc.). Example search terms included: land administration; land administration and food security; land tenure and food security; land information and food

security; land registration and food security; cadastre and food security; land ownership and food security; land management and food security; land parcel and food security. Clearly; these terms do not represent the complete domain of land administration and food security. Finally; due to time constrains a limitation of 50 (fifty) papers was placed on the study. Selection was based on perceived relevance to the review topic: a level of subjectivity was necessary. Together; these limitations should be taken into account when studying the results.

All relevant search results were recorded into a database. In total, fifty (50) articles were studied: data from each was recorded under a range of classifications. These ranged from simple data types (e.g. year of publication, area of study, etc.) through to more complex descriptions (e.g. description of link to food security, direct quotes, etc.). The number of headings grew as the study progressed. This forced the researcher to return to reassess earlier articles in order to ensure completeness. Following classification, analysis of patterns was undertaken in a qualitative and quantitative manner. The aim was to identify and synthesize recurring and validated themes relating to the link between land administration and food security.

Results and discussion

The results of the synthesis are presented under a number of headings. These relate to the most prominent classifications and themes that emerged through the study. These include: year of publication; research type; nature of relationship; strength of evidence; region of interest; land tenure; agriculture; and land governance.

Year of publication: the rise of food security literature

Fig. 1 illustrates the number of articles published per year: a growth trends appears evident. The years 2011 and 2012 were incomplete at the time of the study: the lower numbers are expected. Maxwell (1995) provides an example of earlier literature. Urban farming is demonstrated to deliver higher levels of household food security: access to land is highlighted as a major constraint to urban farming. Others also make reference to access to land, security of tenure, sustainable land use, and the capacity to use land productively (ECA, 2004). More contemporary land administration literature advocates for sound land tenure policies and land-use planning to ensure livelihood of farmers. The application of land registers and cadastres beyond the traditional purposes of markets and taxation could assist in climate change adaptation and mitigation (Van der Molen, 2009). Others reiterate the need to ensure the land administration system play a role in ensuring sustainable development (Enemark, 2010).

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