Trading Places

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Preface

Trading Places is about a new understanding of how people living in African cities access land and renegotiate real estate markets. It is the result of seven years of work developing pro-poor interventions to make urban land markets work better. The work included building up a new body of evidence, engaging in policy change processes, broad-based stakeholder engagement, and testing the new approach in different sites.

The work is a collective effort by a range of people working with the Urban Land Markets Programme Southern Africa, also referred to as Urban LandMark. The programme was funded by UK aid between 2006 and 2013. The work of the programme was an attempt to advance beyond the conventional housing and urban debates of the 1990s and early 2000s, and thus sought to change practice.

One way this book takes the debate forward is by combining an understanding of the physical, social and economic forces, which shape rapidly urbanising cities in Africa. Living on unregistered land in slum conditions is the daily reality for the majority of urban dwellers. Most new urban growth takes place as people access officially unrecognised land.

The work described in this book involved bringing together the urban experts who typically work in the development field (e.g. planners, architects, social scientists, lawyers and the like) with another set of experts who traditionally have not engaged as much in the Africa urban poverty debates, namely property economists, developers and financiers.

The book asserts that understanding complex land issues as well as the market forces described in property economics provides a key to addressing the challenges that arise during the transition from predominantly rural countries to increasingly urbanised
nations. The apparent complexity of this interface leads many to conclude that urban development remains an unsolvable challenge.

This frustration then leads to two extreme responses: let cities grow as they are growing, without much intervention, and then attempt to regularise or formalise them afterwards; or, alternatively: try to enforce an imported system of planning, governance and land commodification, which has worked on other continents, to guide urban development towards better and more efficient urban outcomes.

This book offers a new proposition. Given a fuller grasp of the real dynamics at work in the agency of poor households and communities engaging in land markets, evidence shows that there are indeed practical ways in which the formal planning system can adapt to rapid urban growth. There are ways for practitioners and governments to work with the deeply seated meanings of land as well as with economic forces and the need for investment. Over time this approach can lead to better outcomes where cities are more efficient and more people can progressively realise their rights as city dwellers. More secure land tenure and more effective urban planning can increase the resilience of many more households and communities, especially in the face of the ever-expanding challenges of migration, rapid urbanisation, climate change and unequal economic growth.

Urban LandMark’s evidence-based work spanned three dimensions over the life of the programme: a focus on how the market works (and can be improved) in poor communities; on the daily realities of life for people accessing urban land and trying to hold on to it; and on the institutions and governance of land and markets. These dynamics shape space and places in ways that last for centuries.

The book follows this same sequence. The first chapter discusses the state of the debates around urban land on the continent. Chapter 2 unpacks ways to understand more clearly the complexity of markets in African cities and how to improve market functionality. The third chapter describes the agency of people in engaging in the land market and what people do practically to survive and prosper in the absence of a responsive land governance system. Chapter 4 looks at how land is governed and why many regulatory interventions have
failed. The fifth and final chapter reviews the debates and evidence that have been presented in the book, and places the new approach within its historical context.

In shaping the approach in the writing of this book there are many to thank. Among them, in particular, we would like to thank the five co-authors who have worked together as a collective over a number of years to describe the learning; and the staff of Urban LandMark who provided the platform from which all of the work was achieved, including Lerato Potele, Lucille Gavera, Girly Makhubela, Mary Phalane, Abueng Matlapeng and Jonathan Diederiks.

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The facilitators of this writing process – Helene Perold, Philanie Jooste, Aislinn Delany and Stuart Marr – added tremendous value. Many people and organisations were commissioned over the years to collect evidence, document cases and formulate new ideas, all of whom made a significant contribution. These people and organisations are named in the publications they were responsible for. All of their contributions made it possible to share new perspectives on finding solutions to the complex realities that face urban land dwellers in fast-growing African cities.

Mark Napier