

Markets, Politics and Land Administrative Reform in Africa:

What can African Studies Contribute?

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Abstract:

Within the last twenty years land administration has commanded considerable attention as part of an ongoing process of liberal reform, in which the majority of African countries have introduced new land policies or reformed existing land laws. These land reforms have been influenced by two frameworks: a market based approach of opening up land markets to facilitate private sector investments, and a communitarian approach of recognising customary land rights as a requisite for establishing land markets, and creating synergy between customary and state administration. Paradoxically many of the areas associated with important innovations in strengthening customary rights in land have become associated with land grabs. In several instances land reforms have contributed to complex conflicts over land, which are underpinned by processes of accumulation of land and capital, multifaceted political organisations and social identities involved in land frontiers, and differing notions of citizenship, rights, social contracts, and rights to redistributive justice. This paper critically examines a number of case studies, and places land administration within a wider framework of the political relations of frontier development, accumulation and markets, investigating how these transform notions of community, and rights to land. It concludes by reflecting on the contributions that African Studies can make to understand land relations.