# Assessment of the Lands Tribunal in Resolving State Land Conflicts in Zambia

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#### Abstract

The objectives of this article are to: 1) investigate the different types of state land conflicts occurring in Zambia; and 2) establish whether or not the Lands Tribunal is efficient and effective in resolving state land conflicts. Methodologically, qualitative methods (interviews and questionnaires) supported by documents were used. These research methods were used to conclude that state land conflicts such as invasion of idle or undeveloped private or public land, illegal allocation of land by some politicians and some government officials, violent land acquisition by political cadres, boundary conflicts, multiple allocations of land, eviction by private landlords, and eviction by government agency are occurring with greater frequency in Zambia. However, the Lands Tribunal is unable to adequately resolve these land conflicts due to its centralised nature, limited capacity and lack of public awareness. It is recommend that, guided by research, the Zambian government should consider strengthening the Lands Tribunal by decentralising it to district level, and ensure ongoing capacity building (i.e. adequate funding, ongoing training programme, sufficient transport, and adequate human resource) and awareness. **Keywords**: Zambia, Lusaka, state land conflict, Lands Tribunal

#### 1. Introduction

The issue of land conflicts is one of great concern in many African countries (GLTN/UN-Habitat et al., 2014; Mwesigye, 2014; UNECA, 2011). Land conflicts have been an area of concern largely due to the failure to resolve many of the conflicts which are emerging in both formal and informal areas (Sackey, 2010). The failure has been due to the use of general courts (i.e. courts handling all types of cases - civil and criminal) in resolving land conflicts. General courts have been facing numerous problems – including accessibility, lack of legal and technical expertise, high litigation costs, delay (due to backlog of cases), decision quality, lack of public information and participation, and public trust – which are seen as limiting access to land justice (Mwenda, 2006; Pring and Pring, 2009). In the face of these problems, over two decades, there has been an amazing growth in specialised land courts (SLCs) focused on resolving land conflicts.

In Zambia, a specialised land court is known as Lands Tribunal. The Tribunal was established in 1996 through the Lands Act of 1995. Inspite of being in existence for over 20 years, little has been done on the performance of the Lands Tribunal in resolving land conflicts. It is from this background that this paper assesses the Lands Tribunal in resolving state land conflicts in Zambia. In so doing, I attempt to answer key questions including: 1) What are the different types of state land conflicts occurring in Zambia? 2) What is the present status of the Lands Tribunal and how efficient and effective is it in resolving state land conflicts? This paper draws on literature, personal experience and research in Lusaka District of Zambia to find answers to these questions.

#### 2. State Land Conflicts and Specialised Land Courts: A Literature Review

#### 2.1 Understanding State Land Conflicts

Researchers such as Musyoka and Musoga (2015), and Payne and Durand-Lasserve (2012), describe state land as land held under statutory tenure. Statutory tenure system is established by law or a statute (ibid), and enables formal registration of land ownership. A land conflict on the other hand is defined as a "social fact in which at least two parties are involved, the roots of which are different interests over the property rights to land; the right to use the land, to manage the land, to generate income from the land, to exclude others from the land, to transfer it and the right to compensation for it" (Wehrmann, 2008: 9). In other words, a state land conflict is a disagreement over state land rights. Land conflicts occur between different classes such as physical or legal persons, individuals and land institutions, communities and government as well as communities and individual persons (Sackey, 2010). Land conflicts require being resolved adequately. If this is not done, land conflicts can ultimately lead to violence where people may be injured or killed as well as property being damaged.

## 2.2 Specialised Land Courts - What they are

Specialised Land Courts (SLCs) have many different names, such as Land Tribunals, Cadastral Commissions or Land Courts, but their objective is the same, that is, to deal explicitly and exclusively with land related conflicts (Wehrmann, 2008). SLCs have very different legal jurisdictions, from very broad (including and integrating all laws that relate to land for instance, statutory and customary laws in most sub - Sahara African countries) to very narrow (sometimes even limited to a single law, like statutory law). The most powerful SLCs have

comprehensive legal jurisdiction and a range of enforcement powers. The ultimate purpose of SLCs is to ensure that land conflicts are resolved efficiently and effectively. Pring and Pring (2009) argue that SLCs are better because there are characterised by expertise, efficiency, cost effectiveness, transparency, and flexible rules of procedure and evidence (i.e. employ informal and less intimidating proceedings). These enable greater public participation and confidence in the land conflict resolution process. Specialised land courts help to free general courts from the burden of land related cases, decrease the time people have to invest in solving land conflicts and improve decision-making by judges who are more familiar with land (*ibid*).

As with any other court, SLCs can suffer from shortcomings. Wehrmann (2008) recommends that the following may help to avoid common weaknesses: i) SLCs have to be constituted by the state; ii) the objectives and functions of the SLCs have to be defined; iii) the members of the SLCs (such as the chairman, deputy chairman and support staff) and their individual functions have to be defined. Moreover, staff should be sufficient; iv) special regulations should be defined for the procedures and duties of the SLCs, providing for quick and cheap land conflict resolution; v) it should be agreed that the civil procedure law and rules do not apply to the proceedings of the SLCs, to allow for a more flexible approach; vi) it has to be guaranteed that any person involved in a land conflict can have access to the SLCs. This implies that SLCs should have offices at local level, for example at district level; vii) the members who are appointed to become part of the SLCs must have adequate qualifications and receive special training as required. They would need to be both experts on land issues and good arbitrators; viii) the procedures and decisions of the SLCs have to be transparent, and every staff member accountable and bound to a strict code of conduct; and ix) the procedures and decisions of the SLCs need to be monitored, evaluated and made accessible to the public. Pring and Pring (2009) add that good salary for SLCs decision-makers is very important because it both attract and retain highly competent and committed judges.

## 3. Overview of the Lands Tribunal in Zambia

The Lands Tribunal was created in 1996 as a specialised land court with the objective of achieving speedy, low cost, flexible and efficient means of resolving land conflicts. The Tribunal was established with the view that general courts face congested workloads and that it is very expensive to pursue cases in general courts. Between 1996 and 2009, the Tribunal had limited jurisdiction of handling state land conflicts only. However, in 2010, the Lands Tribunal Act was enacted to expand the jurisdiction of the Tribunal. From 2010, the Tribunal has been handling both state and customary land conflicts (Republic of Zambia, 2010). It should be pointed out that the land tenure system in Zambia is twofold: statutory and customary tenures. Land held under statutory tenure is known as customary land. The focus of this study is state land conflicts which occur on land under statutory tenure.

According to section 5 subsection 1 of the Lands Tribunal Act of 2010, the Tribunal consists of the following members appointed by the Minister:

(a) A Chairperson who is a legal practitioner of not less than seven legal experience;

(b) A Deputy Chairperson who is a legal practitioner of not less than seven legal experience;

(c) A representative of the Attorney General who is an advocate of not less than seven legal experience;

(d) A representative of the Law Association of Zambia of not less than seven legal experience;

(e) A representative of the House of Chiefs;

(f) A Planner registered under the Urban and Regional Planners Act;

(g) A Land Surveyor registered under the Land Survey Act:

(h) A registered Valuation Surveyor registered under the Valuation Surveyors' Act; and

(i) Not more than three persons from the public and private sectors.

It should be pointed out that these members are part-time employees of the Lands Tribunal.

## 4. Methodology

The research was primarily qualitative in nature and adopted a case study strategy, where Lusaka District in Lusaka province was studied. Lusaka Province comprises 8 districts namely: Lusaka, Chongwe, Luangwa, Kafue, Chilanga, Chirundu, Rufunsa and Shibuyunji. The provincial capital: Lusaka is bordered by Kafue, Chilanga and Chongwe (see figure 1). Lusaka district of the Lusaka Province was selected because that is where the offices of the Lands Tribunal are located.



Figure 1: Locational Map - Lusaka Province (Adapted from Chalochatu, 2017)

Key Informants for this study were 11 employees from the Lands Tribunal, Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and law firms. Questionnaires were used to collect information from these informants and purposeful sampling was used to select them.

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Category	Details	No.
Lands Tribunal	Specialised Land Court	1
NGOs	Zambia Land Alliance, Civic Forum on Housing and Habitat, People's Process on Housing and Poverty in Zambia, and U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID)	5
Law Firms	Handling Land Conflicts	5
Total		11

Table 1: List of Key Informants

Further, interviews were conducted with 204 households in Lusaka District and 6 academics (3 from the Copperbelt University and 3 from the University of Zambia) in order to determine the consistency of empirical data from the key informants, thereby also enhancing data validation and reliability. In order to avoid bias, every household in Lusaka District was given a non-zero probability of being selected. This implies respondents were randomly selected in order to have an unbiased representation of the district (Mabikke, 2014). Secondary data were also collected through an analysis of international literature as well as judgments on land-related cases obtained from within Africa (Mushinge and Mwando, 2016). Fieldwork was conducted between May and September, 2016.

## 5. Results and Discussion

5.1 Types of State Land Conflicts

The study intended to establish the different types of state land conflicts occurring in Zambia. Research findings show that the following state land conflicts are occurring with greater frequency.

5.1.1 Invasion of Idle or Undeveloped Private or Public Land

Acquisition of land in Zambia has always being a thorny issue with some few privileged individuals owning huge chunks of land while the less fortunate in the society remain disadvantaged (Saluseki, 2015). Many people who are eager to own land tend not to be in the position to manage accessing land under the current malfunctional land governance framework i.e. state land delivery system is too inefficient (APRM, 2013; CFHH, 2015; Chitengi, 2015). It is been the same people who continue to have access to land (CFHH, 2015). Ordinary Zambians with low incomes have no access to land because it is being allocated to the rich and powerful who could afford it (Daily Nation, 09 May 2016; NAZ, 2015). The issue of limited access to land by many Zambians was also raised by the President (Edgar Lungu) who was quoted by Saluseki (2015, para.6) saying that:

"Work with the Commissioner of Lands to be, and the Minister of Lands to ensure that Zambians have access to land, at affordable prices and easily available, it should not be the preserve of the elite but for every Zambian".

It is against this backdrop that some people in low income group have continued to try and find ways to access land. One way is invasion of idle or undeveloped private or public land. Chama (2007: 12) identified the

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two most common types of land invasion in the country as:

- Invasion of open state land which has been reserved for government use or land under the jurisdiction of local authorities but left open for a long time.
- Invasion of formally planned and allocated land by groups of people who threaten and bar legal land owners from taking possession of their land: such invasion also covers land that is held on title but not developed.

According to Chitonge and Mfune (2015: 214), often, conflicts over invaded land involve violent confrontation as the authorities or the title holders seek to remove the 'invaders' from the land. Thus, in some instances, innocent title holders have ended up losing lives while trying to defend their pieces of land.

5.1.2 Illegal Allocation of Land by Some Politicians and Some Government Officials

There are rampant illegal land allocations by some politicians such as councillors, ruling political party officials and some government officials in Zambia in general and Lusaka District in particular (Key Respondent # 1). The rampant illegal land allocations are also confirmed by debates in the National Assembly of Zambia (NAZ) conducted on 15<sup>th</sup> October 2015. According to NAZ (2015), illegal allocations of land are a cancer sweeping across Zambia. Numerous reports have been made to the Minister of Local Government and Housing office concerning illegal land allocations (*ibid*). The high prevalence of illegality and lawlessness in land allocation are threatening law and order in the country (AllAfrica, 2016). It is estimated that 70% of land in Lusaka District is in the hands of illegal owners with councillors and mayors singled out as some of the actors involved in illegal land deals (The Post, 01 October 2013 cited in Chitonge and Mfune, 2015: 214).

5.1.3 Violent Land Acquisition by Political Cadres

Research findings show that Zambia has been witnessing violent land acquisition (also known as land grabbing) by political cadres for over two decades. Cadres of the ruling party terrorise people over their land (NAZ, 2015). Political cadres are more powerful than politicians and law enforcement agents (Key Respondent # 2). Macmillan Dictionary defines 'political cadres' as a small group of people within a larger organisation such as a political party. In Zambia, these are members of a political party who usually run political cadres' party forms government, they consider land has their payback (Key Respondent # 3). One of the key respondents commented: "It is ironic that during the United National Independence Party (UNIP) government from 1964 (when Zambia became independent) to 1991 (when UNIP handed over power to Movement for Multi-party Democracy - MMD), there was no land grabbing by political cadres. Violent land acquisition by political cadres started when MMD formed government in 1991. Political cadres believed that they can have access to anyone's land. During the MMD rule (1991 – 2011) land grabbing by political cadres was very rife. Unfortunately, this scenario has continued under the government of the Patriot Front (PF) which took over from MMD in 2011. Zambia has so much land at its disposal and if well governed, everyone can partake and enjoy legal rights over this precious resource" (Key Respondent # 4).

Political cadres acquire and demarcate land belonging to genuine title-holders with open impunity even when they know that procedure has to be followed to acquire this land. In almost all the cases, the political cadres come armed with sticks, axes, used tyres, picks, machetes, slashers, shovels and stones with which they attack owners of the land. Although the violent land acquisition by political cadres is rife, there is no effective mechanism to remove political cadres from state land governance (Shakafuswa, 2016). 5.1.4 Boundary Conflicts

Boundary conflicts are mostly between the owners of two or more adjacent properties. Findings show that these conflicts are common: a) in areas with 14-year leases (given for state land which is not surveyed but a provisional certificate of title is issued); b) on land which is allocated and occupied without provision of services such as roads; and c) when land surveyors make errors when undertaking cadastral surveying. Firstly, unsurveyed land does not have clear boundaries of the individual land. Thus, a boundary conflict arises in instances where there are two adjacent unsurveyed properties and one party takes a portion of the land belonging to another and the latter realises that his/her land has been encroached. It is worth mentioning that although 14-year leases have been discontinued, there is still considerable amount of land with provision certificates of title. Secondly, boundary conflicts also occur when land is allocated and occupied without provision of roads. Here, land owners who need access to their properties make their road(s) and in the process encroach on other properties in the area. Finally, due to inadequate funding, land surveyors and equipment at the Survey Department (Ministry of Lands and Natural Resources) and inadequate land surveyors in private practice, there are a number of illegal surveys being undertaken by unauthorised surveyors. These usually use unreliable survey data thereby putting beacons on other peoples' property. This leads to boundary conflicts.

5.1.5 Multiple Allocations of Land

There are instances where a single piece of land could be allocated to two or more people and separate offer letters prepared in the names of different applicants. Cases of double or even triple land allocation are common (Chitengi, 2015; KCC, 2012; Republic of Zambia, 2012; UN-Habitat, 2012). The factors responsible for this

include the lack of coordination between institutions with authority to allocate land (i.e. Ministry of Lands and Natural Resources and Local Authorities), poor record keeping by land institutions and corruption in the land institutions. Regarding lack of coordination, there are instances where the same piece of land is allocated from the Ministry of Lands and Natural Resources and also by the Local Authority in the area (Republic of Zambia, 2012). Further, the Ministry of Lands and Natural Resources has at times issued letters of offer in respect of the same piece of land to two or more persons due to poor record keeping (i.e. poor record keeping does not enable the staff to quickly know who has been allocated what and where) and corruption.

#### 5.1.6 Eviction by Private Landlords

As explained earlier, undeveloped private land can either be invaded or illegally allocated to other people or violently acquired by political cadres. Findings show that title holders would usually try to peacefully engage the squatters with the view of removing them from the land. However, in most cases this does not work because squatters resort to violence. Thus, title holders usually go to court and the court would order for an eviction of squatters. These evictions adversely affect the families of squatters, as their houses are demolished. The squatters become homeless and their household goods get damaged as they are thrown carelessly on the ground. In some instances, bulldozers demolish houses with household goods inside. In some of the eviction cases the government assists through the Disaster Management and Mitigation Unit (DMMU) under the Office of the Vice President, by providing temporary tents and some food. However, due to the fact that the land delivery system is inefficient, these people would still not have access to land and eventually would look for other undeveloped land and invade it.

## 5.1.7 Eviction by Government Agency

In March, 2007, the Cabinet of the Zambia Government sat and resolved on a policy to combat illegal land allocation, land evasion and development in the country (Chama, 2007). It was resolved that Government would demolish all illegal and unplanned settlements throughout the country (*ibid*). The Chief government spokesperson announced at a news conference in Lusaka that Government would use whatever means at its disposal to "restore order in the nation" (*ibid*). According to Government, the development had been necessitated by the increase in "acts of lawlessness, which had gone unabated" (*ibid*). Research findings show that despite this policy being in existence for 9 years, limited success has been achieved. This is because land invasion and attempted eviction has become a hot political issue and therefore invaders are in most cases not evicted because politicians are afraid of losing votes. In spite of political interference, some evictions have still been undertaken by government agencies such as the local authorities, the military and the police.

#### 6. Status of the Lands Tribunal

Considering the high incidence of state land conflicts in Zambia in general and Lusaka District in particular, the study intended to establish whether or not the Lands Tribunal is resolving these conflicts efficiently and effectively. Research findings show that the Tribunal is unable to resolve state land conflicts efficiently and effectively due to reasons explained below.

#### 6.1 Centralised Operations of the Lands Tribunal

The National Decentralisation Policy was adopted in 2002. The aim of the National Decentralisation Policy is to transfer authority, functions and responsibilities as well as appropriate resources to district level in order to improve quality of service delivery (Republic of Zambia, 2002). Research findings show that despite the existence of the policy, the Tribunal is highly centralised with offices in Lusaka District only. So all disputants from the other 105 districts have to travel to Lusaka to have their land conflicts resolved. The net effect is that many people outside Lusaka have been denied the opportunity of having their conflicts resolved by the Tribunal. There is no doubt that this impedes access to justice which is a critical instrument for the protection of human rights.

## 6.2 Insufficient Funding to the Tribunal

Evidence gathered from the questionnaires, interviews and documents indicate that over time, the operations of the Lands Tribunal have been adversely affected by inadequate funding from the Treasury (Ministry of Finance). Table 2 is illustrative (Zambian currency is Kwacha and 1US\$ is equal to 9.92 Kwacha as at 28 August 2017).

Table 2 clearly shows that the Tribunal has been receiving funds less than required. Findings from the Lands
Tribunal indicate that low funding has been the most prominent hindrance in the operations of the Tribunal.

Year	Amount Received (US\$)	Amount Required (US\$)
2011	83,015	>83,015
2012	133,065	>133,065
2013	157,258	>157,258
2014	201,613	>201,613
2015	201,613	>201,613
2016	201,613	>201,613

Table 2: Funding to the Lands Tribunal (Ministry of Finance, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016)

Presently, the Tribunal hears cases for at least 10 consecutive working days per month. With the huge public demand for its services, the Tribunal should ideally be sitting every week days. However, this is unattainable due to inadequate funding from government. Inadequate and inconsistent funding to the Tribunal is one problem that has repeatedly caused delays in disposing of cases (Sikazwe, 2005). It is sad that the Lands Tribunal, with its important role of resolving land conflicts, is usually underfunded (ZLA, 2005). This is why the Tribunal cannot perform its functions to the satisfaction of the majority of the public (*ibid*). The level of underfunding is indicative of the lack of political will on the part of government to ensure the Tribunal operates efficiently.

## 6.3 Lack of Training Programme for the Tribunal Staff

Findings from the Lands Tribunal indicate that the Tribunal does not have a training programme for its staff. Land conflicts are usually complex and sensitive in nature. With the changing environments every day, there is need for staff (i.e. the Registrar and others) who in practice offers advice to the public on land conflicts in the absence of members of the Tribunal (who work on part-time basis), to undergo refresher training in various land conflicts resolution mechanisms (ZLA, 2005).

#### 6.4 Inadequate Transport

Currently, the Lands Tribunal does not have adequate vehicles to cover their operations. Findings from the Tribunal show that there is only one vehicle. To operate effectively and efficiently, the Tribunal requires more vehicles. This impact on the delivery of justice.

## 6.5 Poor Conditions of Service for Board Members

According to findings from the Lands Tribunal, the board members work on a part-time basis and there are given sitting allowances and not a salary. However, the allowances are very low and cannot even cover for their (board members) fuel expenses.

## 6.6 Delivery of Judgments

According to section 12 of the Lands Tribunal Act of 2010, the Tribunal shall deliver judgment within sixty days after the conclusion of the hearing of the case. However, research findings show this is in most cases not attainable. Key respondents (from non-governmental organisations and law firms) and academics indicated that land conflicts are usually not resolved in a timely manner. Delays in the resolution of land conflicts was also confirmed by the respondent from the Lands Tribunal but the average time taken in resolving land conflicts was not provided. Reasons for delay by the Lands Tribunal inter alia include inadequate staff, members of the tribunal working on part-time basis, and underfunding from government.

#### 6.7 Staffing Levels

Research findings show that staffing levels do not meet the current demands of the Lands Tribunal to deliver services as required. Although the numbers of staffing levels were not given, it was confirmed that the current employees are inadequate.

## 6.8 Lack of Public Awareness

During the interviews with the 204 households, the majority asserted that said that they have not heard of the Lands Tribunal (see table 3). Furthermore, consultations which were spearheaded by the Ministry of Lands and Natural Resources in partnership with the Zambia Land Alliance showed that many people all over the country do not know about the existence of the Lands Tribunal (ZLA, 2005). This is partly because the Tribunal does not publicise its operations. This was also confirmed by the respondent from the Lands Tribunal who said that the Tribunal Secretariat will soon embark on a country wide public awareness with a view of publicising the Tribunal operations.

Variable	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Aware	20	9.8
Not Aware	143	70.1
No Response	31	15.2
Do Not Know	10	4.9
Total	204	100

Table 3: Public Awareness about the Lands Tribunal (Field Survey, 2016)

#### 7. Conclusion and Recommendations

What seems to emerge from this research is that the presently the Lands Tribunal cannot adequately resolve state land conflicts due to problems such as centralisation, limited capacity and lack of public awareness. It is therefore a more worthwhile investment for the government to invest in strengthening the Lands Tribunal by ensuring that the Tribunal is decentralised to district level, and ensuring ongoing capacity building (i.e. sufficient funding, ongoing training programme, adequate transport, and sufficient human resource) and awareness. It should be kept in mind that land is a key source of development of all the other sectors but development cannot be attained if the prevailing land conflicts are not resolved effectively and efficiently

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