Introduction: African land digitalisation outcomes for vulnerable social groups -- actors, complexities and contexts.

This Special Issue focuses on the relationship between the digitalisation of land administration and customary landowning communities. Across the countries centred in the Special Issue—Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Ghana, Kenya, and Mali—digitalisation is underway as land administration reform, marked by the establishment of land registers containing digitised land transaction records. This process also includes the use of digital equipment, manuals, and procedures to design and implement all aspects of land transactions and registration processes between land acquirers and statutory land agencies. Digitising records is thus only one component of the broader, gradual digitalisation of all land records and administrative procedures across these countries. National lands agencies use technologies like blockchain, high resolution scanners, advanced Geographic Information System (GIS) systems and software, mobile phones, and the Internet of Things to digitise all land transactions and registration processes efficiently and enable simultaneous access by all parties. Digitalisation thus seeks to reduce fraud, conflicts, complications, enhancing transparency and efficiency in land service delivery to the public.

Digitalisation is the latest land administration reform, supported by legislations such as the Lands Act, 2020 in Ghana and the Land Registration Act, 2012 in Kenya. The ongoing digitisation of public administration in Burkina Faso has extended to the land sector with the introduction of *Teng@Topo*, a digital platform designed to streamline and modernise land management services. Officially launched on July 25, 2025 by Aminata Zerbo-Sabané, the Minister of Digital Transition, Posts and Electronic Communications, together with Mikaïlou Sidibé, the Minister of Urban Planning, Land Affairs and Housing, the platform forms part of the National Strategy for the Modernisation of Public Administration (2021–2025), which seeks to achieve full digitalisation of administrative procedures by 2025 (Njoya, 2025). By centralising land information

and enabling users to submit and track applications online, *Teng@Topo* marks a significant step toward enhanced efficiency, transparency, and accessibility in Burkina Faso's land governance system.

The above stated developments were preceded by colonial and early postcolonial land legislation aimed at improving the coordination and organisation of land transactions. They are grounded in efficiency, denoting minimisation of time, labour, costs, and conflicts in land transactions. This promotes an efficient land market, effective land use management, and greater value creation from land for development (Ansah et al., 2024; Deyaaso, 2025). Digitalisation using blockchain technology, for instance, involves the dematerialisation of transactions around landed property. This methodology digitally connects parties to land transactions, minimising human and error–prone disruptions and time delays (Amadi–Echendu 2021). It reduces land transaction costs and provides secure tenure, which can be leveraged by land acquirers for various benefits, such as access to credit by small land holders (Abab et al. 2023).

Digital resources have been employed across many natural resources systems in Africa, offering tangible resource management and sustainability benefits. For example, digitalisation has been a prominent development goal in agriculture (Mazwane 2022) and wildlife (Fergus 2023). Digitalisation has become inevitable in land administration. It is often framed through narratives of efficiency aimed at facilitating land delivery for investments toward development. However, the digitalisation of land administration faces the challenge of marginalising local people from their lands in favour of external liberal market–oriented interests. Literature across Africa notes the imperativeness of digitalisation to serve local livelihoods and land tenure security. Though the process faces key capacity, administrative, and logistic challenges as the contributors of this Special Issue note, the process is more advanced in countries like Kenya than others. Yet, in all the countries included in this study, digitalisation for efficient land administration still has a long way to go.

In Ghana, all land transaction and title registration processes are supposed to be captured within the country's digitalisation reforms. However, many of the steps involved are still effected manually due to persistent challenges (Ansah et al. 2024). These include the continued use of physical paperwork and manual processes alongside digitised systems, creating duplication; inadequate staff capacity and limited client awareness to implement the methodology effectively; and weak coordination among divisions of the Commission, including the Client Service Access Unit, Public and Vested Land Management Division, Survey and Mapping Division, Land Valuation Division, and Land Registration Division, (Ansah et al. 2024). Thus, while presented as efforts to promote efficient land administration, urbanisation, increased large-scale external land acquisitions, and expanding state control are placing significant pressure on land under customary tenure. Moreover, fragmented and uncoordinated practices continue to generate inefficiencies in land administration.

That benefits of digitalisation for land administration are widely acknowledged; thus far, literature shows that bottom-up approaches to digitalised land administration are practised and beneficial for communities, for instance in East Africa. In Ethiopia, digitalisation has proven to be a useful approach to land reform that benefits smallholders who use land as collateral for credit, where most people in urban and rural areas hold not more than two hectares of land (Abab et al. 2023; Deyaaso 2025). In that country's context, the marginalisation of local people over their lands is supposedly addressed through participatory approaches to land administration that support security of land tenure for smallholders (Gebrihet & Pillay 2021). Indeed, Ethiopia's case shows that when local participation is accompanied with the power to decide and implement their own land use goals, participation in the process of land use planning and digitalisation enhances the value of land to communities. In Rwanda, Mihigo et al. (2025) find that local authorities in land administration digitalisation have been instrumental to supporting state officials of the National Land Authority to identify precise land boundaries and resolve any land

disputes before land is digitally recorded. This minimises conflicts between recorded land data and the actual situation on the ground (Mihigo et al. 2025). Many years earlier, Luyombya and Obbo (2013) found that digitisation in Uganda delivered efficiency in land administration, facilitating development. This narrative is not different from Rwanda, where state and non-state formal actors and communities acknowledge the potential contribution of technology to enhance participatory and responsible land governance for land tenure security (Mihigo et al. 2025).

The attainment of tenure security for local people through employing digital resources in land administration occurs when digitalisation is based on framings that are internally derived from and reflect the sociocultural foundations of land in communities. Thus, local participation in framing, implementing, and evaluating the digitalisation of land administration is a necessary, albeit not sufficient, condition for success. In this regard, rural and urban land administration planning that benefits communities proceeds through a bottom-up approach to capacitate the effective participation of social groups, including women (Belay 2024). For instance, it is argued that the use of SmartLandMaps enhances participation and enhances the benefits of digitalisation to communities by supporting the generation of baseline conditions of and rights in land prior to digitising (Lindner 2023). Similarly, Mazwane (2022) opines that the digitalisation of land administration works best when it offers opportunities to local small-scale farmers, rather than being implemented as large, modernist projects imposed by the central state and detached from local realities.

Deprivation around digitalisation

Despite its promised efficiency, potential to unlock capital, and role in fostering development, digitalisation gradually liberalises control over land and its use, eroding prospective benefits to communities. Financialisation is one key land use form that has developed and is lucrative for large investors through digitalisation in the absence of stricter regulations. In the Global South generally, Bludnik (2022)

identifies that land grabbing is a key failure of the digitalisation of land administration. She observes that digitalisation has transformed land markets into mechanisms for the financialisation of environmental resources, whereby land is acquired not for any productive endeavours but to obtain credit, speculate on rents, and extract other financial rewards from global and national financial markets (Bludnik 2022). In Africa, despite the introduction of sophisticated technologies like blockchains and unmanned aerial vehicles (Tan et al. 2021) to generate data on land transactions, caution is only proper to identity implications for local people.

Moreover, the flow of credit from formal financial institutions using land as collateral is becoming more important through digitalisation, as information on land conditions becomes more available and accessible. Yet most of this credit, especially in the agricultural sector, is being channelled towards large-scale agricultural enterprises that acquire large tracts of land from communities (Abab et al 2023). Though such ideas around access to credit using land title recordation follow arguments around the roles of credit worthiness in capital formation (Soto 2001; Mihigo 2025), the contributions in this Special Issue and literature on the subject show that the majority of smallholders have limited access to credit (Musembi 2013). This is because banks prefer to lend to businesses that provide information on land tenure security where land is used as collateral. This tenure security is often considered best achieved through digitalisation. Yet, it is large-scale investors, not smallholders, who are digitalising their land rights. Abab et al. (2023, p. 2) caution that it is often presumed that tenure security achieved through land registration and title recordation increases access to credit by enabling small landowners to use land as collateral. However, this is not the case, as evidence of positive credit effects from land registration and certification programmes for smallholders remains limited, and at times, mixed.

Data generated through land digitalisation are crucial for development planning, revenue generation, land investments, land tenure improvements, and land administration more broadly. Drawing from field results in the contributions to this Special Issue,

community people acknowledge the usefulness of data for accountability and transparency in land administration at the customary level. Yet, this data is exclusively controlled by the national land agencies and software firms that develop the tools. Transactions over customary land are increasingly being securely managed between different parties, often beyond the direct control of customary owners. In this secure digital environment, it is difficult to contest claims to land which is already digitalised. Thus, communities that face investor misdeeds over lands are constrained from reclaiming control over their previously owned lands and from legitimately seeking greater benefits (Gyan 2025). In this context, it has been well documented over the years that investors often fail to meet the economic and social needs of the communities in which they operate, leading to protracted conflicts (Amanor 2012; Koch et al. 2019; Narh 2024; Gyan 2025).

Monitoring land transactions is important for land administration (Mbogo et al 2023) and can empower customary landowning communities to claim land benefits from investors. However, as a result of their exclusion from digitalisation and its data, customary landowning communities lose material benefits and revenue which they could otherwise have generated from customary land. Land data offer an opportunity to implement a customary tax system, which constitutes a significant benefit for families and landowning communities deprived through corruption from benefitting from state resources. Drawing on experiences of land use planning in Tanzania, Huggins (2018) cautions that although the application of digital technologies can potentially enable communities to be centrally involved in, and exert control over, land use planning processes, customary landowners are often not in control of how digitalised data on their lands are generated, shared, interpreted, adapted, and framed. In Botswana, though the country's Land Administration Procedures Capacity and Systems has sought to register all lands digitally, it has faced loopholes with data management, delays, resource constraints, and poor coordination with local communities and other stakeholders (Magosi et al. 2014).

The contributions to this Special Issue demonstrate that the disconnection of customary landowning communities from the digitalisation process deprives them of the benefits of digitalisation over their lands. They lose land as sociocultural heritage as digitalisation facilitates capital formation in land, including processes of financialisation and speculation). They also lose power and control as customary land administration is constructed as the problem, resulting in data about their lands being held beyond their reach. This loss of control further erodes their ability to shape equitable and socially-grounded development discourses that provide opportunities for everyone to reproduce themselves socioeconomically. The cumulative effect of these losses is that communities are losing their power and capacity to reproduce themselves culturally, socially, politically, and economically. They are losing their youth to urban centres and irregular migration as farming systems collapse as investors take over, forcing local populations to serve as a pool of labour mobilised at the convenience of capitalist investors.

A systemic formation of liberal socio-environment

Ben Cousins (2019) found that the loss of control over land through disconnected digitalisation negatively impacts social reproduction for landowning communities. Social reproduction through control over lands entails not only economic values but also social obligations. Customary institutions in rural Africa reproduce customary rites and obligations, including marriage, death ceremonies, kin bonding, and chiefly reverence, among others. Land provides resources to meet these cultural and social reproductive obligations. Common property relations in Africa are fundamentally rooted in ontologies and epistemologies that view people as inalienably collective beings who form an integral part of their ecologies (Ramutsindela et al. 2025). In this regard, resource governance—particularly, as examined in this Special Issue, the digitalisation of land administration—contributes to the erosion of communal property relations by individualising land resources for

investors. In doing so, it overlooks and obscures African socio–ecological realities and imposes external models that disrupt processes of socio–ecological reproduction (Ramutsindela et al., 2025). Land allocation to investors that drive communities into labour for investors and constrained social reproduction is a reaction to the liberal capitalist discourse around land. Moreover, youth and women deprived of capital are falling into labour pools for capitalist producers, unable to sustain a stable and sustainable livelihood that enables sustainable social reproduction of themselves and their families. Cousins (2019) advises the formation of capital from below to support small–scale land holders. This is where land reform, including digitalisation, should promote pro–poor investments in land to enable small–scale landholders create and reinvest profits towards capital accumulation.

As editors, we align with the argument that land reforms and planning in Africa are mostly established as '…liberal rational bureaucratic land tenure systems…and market–based land tenure rooted in neoliberalism that may not reflect local values, social systems, and livelihoods…' (Frewer & Chang, 2014, p. 268, cited in Huggins, 2018, p. 214). While communities may be involved in digitalisation in East Africa, they may be cooperating in processes leading to the liberalisation of their lands to varying degrees among countries. Often, liberal, capitalist, statist, and external models of land utility are imposed on local people, marginalising them in the administration of their lands. For Ghana, the digitalisation of land administration is heavily supported by external financing and technical resources, making external control over the discourse and practice of land administration inevitable. Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) and digitalisation are imperative for progress in all areas, including land administration and agriculture. The challenge is that policy justifications for digitalisation create difficulties and inconsistencies in the reform of customary land administration. Without this critique, digitalisation creates affordances or conditions for the state and its liberal–capitalist goal to determine how land should be used. It represents an economic liberalisation of assets, which is part of a systemic

approach to maintaining the wealth and hegemony of those who have historically wielded such power to decide the fate of customary landowning communities.

Literature barely engages with this neoliberal development discourse that digitalisation promotes. In this sense, we argue that digitalisation is merely one methodological expression of a broader discourse, even though it is often presented as the sole pathway to societal prosperity. For instance, Magosi captures this growth imperative of digitalisation by observing, in reference to Botswana, that

> "Good land management allows for efficient management of both land and land information … to ensure prosperous social and economic development for Botswana's population through transparent, efficient, and effective land management" (Magosi et. al, 2024, p. 1916).

We contend, based on insights from literature and the contributions to this Special Issue, that the challenge of attaining digitalisation that responds to the sociocultural values of communities and benefits to them is a lack of engagement with the discursive foundations of land administration and governance in Africa. This lack of deeper critique has served to marginalise communities in the administration of their lands. Uncritiqued structural and discursive forces transfer control over land to elite national and international actors who exploit resources under the false justification of development for everyone. Processes of marginalisation are facilitated by the externally driven design and implementation of digitalised natural resource administration, which frequently overlook, ignore, or fail to engage with community sociocultural contexts and the non-liberal foundations of social relations that shape land governance. Thus, marginalisation in land administration digitalisation reforms, in the context of this Special Issue, is structural. This emphasis highlights how discourses on the value of land shape representations of local people and their lands as inefficient managers, thereby justifying interventions framed as necessary for development. To this end, we contend that portrayals

of customary land administration as inefficient (used to justify digitalisation and increased state control over land governance) are merely symptoms of broader structural conditions shaped by liberal capitalist relations to land. Contributions to this Special Issue provide nuanced and detailed discussion of the overview we have provided above. In the next section, we summarise these contributions to guide readers through the Special issue.

Contributions to the Special Issue

Moubassiré Sigué's contribution introduces us to digital technology in the management of cadastral and property affairs in Burkina Faso, seen as an alternative to securing land tenure. His contribution responds to several questions: What are the societal implications of digitising the land registry in Burkina Faso? What are the resilience strategies of populations affected by the digitisation of urban land? And to what extent does the digitisation of land represent an instrument for legitimising political power and social control? The contribution asserts, however, that the introduction of digitalisation disrupts the traditional levers of land–related social organisation in Burkina Faso. While formal authorities such as land registry and tax authorities tout the benefits of digitalisation to reduce conflicts and clarify tenure, many people are resistant and disillusioned, claiming it exposes their asserts to government control. Over and above all these arguments, if digitisation is to become a modern instrument of urban governance, it will require a change of paradigm and mentality on the part of the players involved.

At a time when Cameroon's public administration is undergoing a gradual process of digital transformation, Gely Mengena's contribution provides an overview of the land digitalisation initiative launched by the Ministry of State Property, Surveys and Land Tenure (MINDCAF) in 2010, while highlighting its main limitations. Her analysis shows that land administration has significantly improved since the establishment of the National Geodetic Reference Network, which has facilitated the effective dematerialisation of land procedures. Nevertheless, the full

implementation of the digitalisation process continues to face substantial financial, technical, and institutional challenges. By ethnographically examining the digitalisation of land procedures through the geodetic network, this study also demonstrates that the land governance instruments developed by MINDCAF can be understood, as Hood suggests, as "sociological institutions" (2007). These instruments make it possible to trace their historical development and practical impacts through discourse and practice, while also revealing a broader reconfiguration of relations between governors and the governed in the digital era.

Margaret Njoki Mwareri's contribution reveals results in Kenya that are similar to those in Burkina Faso. Margaret engages specially with the stronger disempowerment to women that the digitalisation of land administration poses in Kenya. While the potential benefits of this reform are considerable, the process reproduces and deepens existing structural inequalities against women. Her contribution critically examines the gendered implications of land digitalisation in Kenya, contending that this reform unintentionally reinforces patriarchal norms and exclusionary land tenure practices against women. In her field research, she finds that in marginalised regions, digital systems in land administration privilege individuals with formal land claims, often men, neglecting the customary and informal tenure rights on which many women depend. Margaret cautions that these significant challenges confronting women's land rights in digitalisation must be addressed to prevent further entrenchment of gender inequalities around land ownership, access, and use.

Drawing from ethnographic field research in Mali and Ghana, Lamine Doumbia and Peter Narh expose the disconnections between digitalisation and customary tenure systems. Their contribution attempts to explain the dynamics of equity for social groups and the sustainability of land administration in both countries. Framing their work around the commons philosophy in natural resources relations, Lamine and Peter contend that digital land reforms are not neutral technical shifts, but transformative processes that reconfigure shared land systems and provoke

grassroots contestation. They highlight the potential for inequalities, conflicts, and deprivation facing customary land rights holders if digitalisation fails to integrate customary tenure. Digitalisation seeks to promote efficient land transactions that facilitate individual land ownership and tenure at the expense of communal land access. The contribution, however, cautiously navigates the contentious issues of inefficiencies in customary land administration. The authors do not romanticise customary land tenure systems, noting that digitalisation may address the complications and inefficiencies of customary tenures. Rather, they emphasise that digitalisation could promote efficient land governance and administration for local and national socioeconomic development if digitalisation is integrated into customary land tenure systems, rather than existing separately from it.

Finally, but not least, in a more quantitative work, Ebenezer Osei Jones addresses the issue of participation in land administration for communities in Ghana. Specifically, the contribution engages with the level of participatory land administration, the impact on peasant livelihoods, and the relationship between participatory land administration and livelihood outcomes in communities. Using digitalisation as an instance, Ebenezer finds a positive relationship between the level of peasant livelihoods and land policies, meaning that land policies like digitalisation directly affect the livelihoods of communities that depend on land. His findings pose significant implications for designing and implementing land administration initiatives, including digitalisation reform in a participatory manner with customary landowning communities to enhance their livelihoods. The contribution particularly notes the urgency of prioritising gender–balanced land administration to address gender disparities in land ownership, access, and use.

General conclusions

Taken together, these contributions lead us to conclude that digitalisation offers new approaches to efficient land administration.

However, the contributions to this Special Issue show that its distribution is shallow, defining land administration as only a technical problem, rather than a sociocultural and political one. Within this technically framed, ostensibly pragmatic approach to land administration, the relationship between customary landholding communities and the state and its agencies is constructed in a manner that positions customary land administration as perpetually under accusation. Thus, by virtue of being framed as deficient, customary land administration is positioned as peripheral to digitalisation. Yet, a deeper analysis of land administration shows that customary land administration is rather a victim of the neo-liberalisation of land. It is futile to argue that customary land tenure is incident-free. Indeed, rights-based intra- and inter-social group conflicts/contests, irregular allocation[1], information discrepancies, and inequalities are all carried over into the digitalisation system. This affects the credibility and sustainability of land administration.

However, to take a cue from Cousins (2019), to avoid collapse, decay, and the cultural, social, and economic violence that disconnected land reforms like digitalisation pose to customary landowning communities, digitalisation will have to be approached as a complementary to the promotion of capital formation and the social reproduction of communities. The commons and infrastructure constructs are useful in this regard. The solution to the social reproduction challenge that digitalisation poses to customary landowning communities is to develop digitalisation from below, guided by the goal to provide benefits to communities and in keeping with their sociocultural and political norms around land as a common resource. Experiences from South Africa (Heimann et al. 2025) and Ethiopia (Gebrihet and Pillay 2021) show that when local participation is accompanied with the power to decide and implement their own land-use goals, participation in land use planning and digitalisation enhances the value of land to communities.

[1] For instance, where a subchief or family head by-passes the divisional or paramount chief and issues allocation notes.

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