

From Paper to Pixels: Benin's Journey to a Nationwide Digital Land Registry and Cadastre

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SUMMARY

To provide all Beninese citizens the right to access land, bring economic prosperity and prevent land-related disputes, the Beninese government aims to establish a nationwide digital land administration system. With financial support from the Netherlands, the Land Administration Modernization Project (PMAF) started in Benin in 2018. Unconventional methods have been used in implementing fit-for-purpose land administration: marking borders using locally produced boundary stones, involving the local population in data collection activities, and registering presumed ownership. The results of the project are promising, with a significant reduction of costs per parcel combined with radical acceleration of the data collection and maintenance process.

With the introduction of the 2013 Land Administration Law and the establishment of the Beninese National Land Agency (ANDF), Benin had decided upon centralized land administration, with the objective of recording the entire national territory in one digital system. With this law, Benin has opted for a high level of legal certainty, a Torrens-based system, with the provision of land titles that grant a practically indisputable property right to the natural person or legal entity stated on the title.

Except for the legal transition period of ten years, no further measures had been taken to ease the transition to the legally prescribed title system. The following assumptions implicitly provided the support that this approach would deliver the envisioned legal certainty to Benin:

1. That the Land Administration Law compels all landowners, of their own accord, to apply for a land title within a foreseeable period
2. That these title applications and resulting transactions generate a stream of revenue such that

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ANDF can provide its services in each municipality of Benin.

Five years after the introduction of the Land Law in 2013, it appeared these implicit assumptions would not be satisfied. The legal certainty had increased, but its effect was limited since the transition to titles was progressing more slowly than expected. The procedure for obtaining a land title takes too long and is too complex and too expensive for most people in Benin. In 2018, approximately 45,000 land titles had been issued. By January 2021, this number had risen to about 60,000. This is only a very small part of the total number of parcels to be registered in Benin, which ANDF estimates at about eight million. In 2018, it was obvious that this process would not succeed in registering land rights for a substantial portion of the Benin territory by the end of the transition period in 2023. For this reason ANDF joined forces with experts from the Netherlands and jointly find a way to implement nationwide land administration.

The PMAF project mapped and registered more than 450,000 parcels within three years. To store the data from these initially collected parcels– and the approximately 7.5 million parcels collected in the future – an IT system (e-Foncier Benin) was created by a team of local software developers. Last but not least, in collaboration with ANDF and municipalities maintenance procedures are designed to keep the data up to date and reliable.

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