Can a cutting-edge pilot project restore trust and transparency to Uganda’s land management? With a plan that focuses on decentralizing services and increasing accountability, Uganda is betting a modernized approach will cure its land disarray.

It’s a scene repeated throughout southern Uganda, from Jinja to the capital of Kampala, from one end of the 150-kilometer Masaka-Mbarara road to the other. It’s happening in Mukono and Wakiso. And advocates hope it will spread throughout the rest of the east african nation.

Since early 2013, Ugandans in this 17,000-kilometer region have traveled to six strategically placed centers, dubbed Ministerial Zonal Offices — or MZOs. They are arriving with high hopes. That’s because they’ve set out to achieve something that is all too rare in their nation’s history: performing land transactions.

Today they are conducting land transactions — and they are doing it with transparency, confidence and trust. They are registering title documents, attaining mortgages, selling acres of land and transferring property rights. Instead of torn and frayed paper documents, their land records are secured in digital files linked to state-of-the-art databases. Instead of navigating a maze of red tape and payoffs, they are protected by a system of checks and balances, one that promotes accountability and discourages fraud.

“This is a big achievement,” says Richard Oput, the Assistant Commissioner for Lands at the Ministry of Lands, Housing and Urban Development (MLHUD). “In many ways, this is something many people never thought they would see in their lifetimes.”

THE CHALLENGE: MODERNIZING UGANDA’S LAND MANAGEMENT

Turn back the clock just a few years and Uganda’s land management picture looked very different. The nation was known for its cumbersome and inefficient land policies, questionable business practices and a near total lack of confidence from citizens and investors. The World Bank’s 2013 “Doing Business” report ranked Uganda 120th out of 185 nations on the ease of doing business — and 124th in registering property. Land transactions were conducted at the MLHUD headquarters on Parliament Avenue in Kampala, the hub of the nation’s land ministry. For many Ugandans, that meant a maddening trek of hundreds of kilometers, a journey that was often repeated again and again as the inefficient paper-based system moved at an interminably slow pace.

“Imagine traveling for 12 hours, waiting for days and at the end of it all, you have accomplished nothing,” Oput says.

The process could take anywhere from 100 to 300 days — or longer. Some title-seekers waited a year for results. Between registration fees, stamp duty and travel costs — not to mention back-office bribes to grease the registry wheels — it wasn’t unusual for a single land registration to cost 300,000 Ugandan shillings, more than $100 US. Or, when the title-seekers were finally frustrated by the cost, the travel and the corruption, many simply gave up.

THOMSON REUTERS AUMENTUM HELPED UGANDA ESTABLISH A MODERNIZED APPROACH TO LAND TRANSACTION MANAGEMENT

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“People have had little faith. They get so frustrated that they give up on the process and start doing business on their own, unofficially,” says Nadege Orlova, DeSILISoR Project Director. “These are the most insecure kinds of transactions. They have no value with respect to the law.”

Documents were forged. Parcels of land were often allocated to multiple owners. The entire system was vulnerable to theft and corruption. Land disputes were rampant. And investors were reluctant to risk their money in such a tenuous environment. More than 80 percent of Uganda’s land is unregistered — and the security of the other 20 percent is uncertain at best.

“Land insecurity is an enormous obstacle to [Uganda’s] economic and social development,” Orlova says. “This was a situation where something very desperately had to change.”

THE SOLUTION: THOMSON REUTERS AUMENTUM

Today, change is in the air for title-seekers in southern Uganda. In 2010, the World Bank awarded a tender to embark on a bold land reform effort — one that encourages development, promotes investment and bolsters the trust of its citizenry. The $10 million project is called “Design, Supply, Installation, and Implementation of the Lands Information System and Securing of Land Records (DeSILISoR).

With the help of technology and consulting by Thomson Reuters Aumentum, DeSILISoR is transforming an inefficient and error-prone land administration into a modernized, secure and transparent IT-based land administration framework. It’s a part of the $24 million “Improving Business Environment” component of the Private Sector Competitiveness (PSCP) II initiative. DeSILISoR is already painting a new Ugandan portrait. In parts of southern Uganda, fragile paper records have disappeared — replaced by easily searchable digital titles and modernized cadastral information systems.

In the pilot areas, Ugandans no longer endure long journeys back and forth to Kampala. Now, citizens can conduct their land transactions at the newly opened MZO.

And the labyrinth system of “hidden costs” that blocked title-seekers’ path and encouraged corruption is becoming a relic of the past. “Before, you would wind your way through a chain of different civil servants,” Orlova says. “Each of them would try to get a bit of money from you.” Now the process is transparent. The digital system tracks every movement of your title, from a receptionist’s hands to a clerk’s desk. All fees are prominently posted. And registering your title, a process that once took month’s or years, can often be completed in a matter of days.

“These are very good enhancements,” Oput says. “You can now conduct your business with certainty.”

The DeSILISoR project targeted six pilot MZO: Kampala, Mukono, Wakiso, Jinja, Masaka and Mbarara. It also established a Kampala-based National Land Information Centre, which serves as both technical support and as a data repository for all the sites. The MLHUD headquarters was also upgraded and modernized.

Already, DeSILISoR has laid the groundwork for a comprehensive digital registry. To date, the project has converted half a million deteriorating paper titles into a digital format. Records dating back nearly 90 years were vetted and validated before being entered into the system. And more than 16,500 torn and frayed maps were scanned in just six months.

THE RECOGNITION: LAND LEGACY’S CRUCIAL ROLE

Over half of Ugandan households count agriculture as the single most important source of their livelihood. More than 40 percent of households earn a living from subsistence farming and 65 percent of the population are employed in agriculture and hunting. In rural areas, 85 percent of people depend on land for their livelihood and income.

In Uganda, land is at the heart of agricultural policies, rural development, territorial planning and the management of natural resources. But the nation’s land policy has been hampered by challenges — from failing institutions to population pressures. Uganda’s population has soared from 6 million in 1962 to over 36 million today.

It’s projected to continue climbing and reach 54 million by 2025, 77 million by 2035. The nation’s population density is about 230 people-per-square kilometer — far above the 100-person threshold that development studies consider an ecologically threatening figure. Those pressures have spilled more competition for smaller and smaller plots of land.

Uganda operates under four types of land tenure as recognized by its 1995 Constitution. About 80 percent of Uganda’s land falls under Customary tenure, which remains largely unregistered and insecure, despite being codified by the 1998 Land Act law. In south-central and western Uganda, much of the land falls under the Mailo/Native Freehold system (essentially Freehold).
Mailo tenure has its origins in the Uganda Agreement of 1900, when land was allocated in multiples of fractions of square miles. In fact, the term “mailo” is a derivation of the English “mile square.”

Freehold and Leasehold tenures are scattered nationally. Each tenure system has its own registry: the Mailo/Native Freehold and Customary registries are decentralized; the Leasehold and Freehold registries are centralized. A major objective of the DeSILISOR project was to unify information systems and decentralize operations of all registries (other than the Customary registry) under the newly created MZOIs to eliminate multiple allocations of land rights.

Today, Uganda is recognizing the crucial role land tenure plays in transitioning to a modern society with improved living standards and a skilled work force. Secure land management is an important step in everything from reducing poverty to stimulating the economy.

THE BENEFITS: HOW A DIGITAL SYSTEM CAN REWRITE A LAND LEGACY

Beyond the many benefits that ProVal has brought to the county’s assessing process, McDowell points to one feature to illustrate the overall value of the system. “With ProVal, once we capture assessment value data we can build uniform and reliable value sets,” he said. “This allows us to analyze properties both by type, by neighborhood and other various characteristics to determine what model adjustments are needed to provide the best value which reflect market conditions. We can consistently produce reliable evaluations, which are the basis for the property tax system within the county.”

DeSILISOR officials cited numerous benefits of modern digital land management, including:

- Reducing the cost and time involved in land transactions, like transferring property rights or processing mortgages. According to World Bank statistics, property transfers once took more than 200 days to complete. Now they can be done in just 52 days. And obtaining a mortgage, which could once take more than a week, can now be accomplished in about three days
- Title search times have disappeared. A process that once took more than a year can now be completed instantaneously
- The backlog of unprocessed land registrations has been eliminated
- Confidence in real estate agents, mortgage finance organizations and private developers have increased
- Working relationships between the land registry, banks and other parties in the land market have improved

THE CHANGE: TRANSFORMING TRADITION

In the past, MLHUD oversaw the historically long and arduous process of making a land transaction. In Freehold or Leasehold cases, most business had to take place in the capital, adding costs and frustration to title-seekers traveling to-and-from offices. The poor infrastructure and lack of oversight encouraged corruption. The system was so overburdened and frustrating to navigate that many people preferred simply to ignore it.

“Let’s say all your documents are in order, your receipts are paid and the registration fees at the bank are settled,” Orlova says. “Remember, there are still hundreds of transactions that take place at the registry. And each is multiplied by three, depending on whether you were working with Leasehold, Freehold or Mailo [land tenures]. There’s simply no way the paper system was built to accommodate that volume.”

Still, there was never a guarantee that a title would be found intact. Despite previous attempts to overhaul the system, land records were often in poor condition. The MLHUD largely lacked indices and storage space. As many as 60 percent of the paper records were nearly unsalvageable. The irreplaceable titles were exposed to everything from rats to beetles to age and humidity. Paper records were lost or worn from constant handling. Many practically crumbled at the touch.

Using Thomson Reuters Aumentum technology, the DeSILISOR project began the complex task of rehabilitating and reorganizing the registries. Even among the records that hadn’t turned to dust, the files were in shambles. Some properties had double or multiple registrations. Several people seemingly owned valid titles to the same plots. Titles long presumed lost were shoved into the wrong file covers. Original registry titles were stored in the same file cover as substitute copies. In many cases, the substitute was more up-to-date than the original.

Thousands of maps and documents were scanned and indexed. Staff began linking parcels maintained by the Department of Surveys and Mapping with titles maintained by the Department of Land Registration. In this way, geographic information was overlaid to uncover spatial patterns. Topographic information is overlaid with parcel information, and then demographic information. Not only does this allow the system to check the geometry of existing parcels and to draw new parcels (particularly in rural areas), but the data can also be shared with other projects. If, for example, an industrial park or proposed highway were being developed, the government could use the centralized data to determine the human and environmental impact of the project.
Most significantly, the linked parcels allow officials to visualize areas of land conflict in ways that were simply impossible by looking through paper property records. With state-of-the-art aerial imagery overlayed with scanned, vectorized and geo-referenced cadastral sheets, the digital system provides a powerful portrait of overlapping land rights. Areas of conflict can be pinpointed and targeted for mitigation strategies.

“That just was not possible when [land management] was conducted manually,” Oput says.

With the record restoration underway, the project concentrated on decentralizing the land management administration. The centerpiece of the initiative was establishing the six MZOs. These centers serve as “one-stop-shops” for the pilot zones, equipped to handle functions like surveying, planning, land administration, valuation and registration. Not only are the MZOs networked and customer friendly, but installing decentralized offices saves title-seekers the time and expense of traveling to the capital for transactions. “Now, if you have to do a procedure for Jinja, you go to [the office in] Jinja,” Orlova says.

Next, the project addressed the inefficiencies and corruption in the titling-process. The manual system involved leafing through stacks of dusty paper each time someone requested a record. Searches were time-consuming — and often unsuccessful. On average, each transaction involved 12 procedures. Staffers were unqualified and often unscrupulous. About 35% of complaints garnered from the old system concerned fraud and counterfeiting. Another 33% were related to delays in transactions and the inability to find documents. In response, DeSILISoR embarked on a comprehensive training program. Policy guidelines were devised. Audit trails were added to provide unparalleled oversight of office operations.

THE DIFFERENCE: NOT BUSINESS AS USUAL

Under the new system, a title-seeker presents his documents at an MZO reception desk. Assuming that his records are complete, he is handed an acknowledgement letter generated by the system. The letter officially recognizes receipt of his documents. From there, the client’s role is finished. After he is told approximately when his transaction will be processed, he can return home. “There is only one point of contact,” Oput says. “And there’s no opportunity for money to change hands under the table.”

The system then records every step of the transaction. The file is traced to each clerk in the office. All documents are scanned. Documents are automatically generated by the system and bar-coded. Not only does this cut off potential fraud, it also adds a level of accountability that didn’t exist in the old system. “You know who did what with your file,” Orlova says. “You know if your file is stuck somewhere or if it’s been sitting on someone’s desk for two weeks.”

The biggest challenge to modernizing Ugandan’s land administration program may have been human capacity. Many of the MLHUD employees lacked the skill sets needed to work in an archive or registry office. Prior to joining the ministry, few had experience with information technology. “Some people had never held a mouse,” Orlova says. “They would turn it upside down and wait for something to happen.” In order to make the system work, DeSILISoR had to recruit, train and motivate a new staff. Over the course of several months, training sessions conducted by Thomson Reuters (including on-the-job training) helped staffers become conversant with the new registry and cadastre systems. To date, more than 200 staffers have been trained on everything from basic IT skills to the details of the LIS process. “It is like night and day,” Oput says. “These were people who had no computer skills. Now they are competent after just six months.”

THE CONSISTENT MESSAGE: THIS IS GOING TO WORK

Staff seemed to face new obstacles each day. Power outages and network breakdowns between MZOs and the National Land Information Center were common place. But by early 2013, the project had hit many of its most important targets: 500,000 titles and land administration files were digitized; 16,500 maps were rehabilitated and scanned, with 14,300 geo-referenced and another 4,500 vectorized. Since the MZOs opened, Oput says the Ministry has hosted tours with bank, survey and real estate associations as well as the Minister of Finance and delegations from Tanzania and Ghana.

Still the project hasn’t achieved its entire goal. So far, public awareness campaigns haven’t dispelled persistent gossip about whether the offices are open and the system is functioning. The next phase of the project will include an aggressive public awareness campaign focusing heavily on radio ads. “Too many people aren’t aware that everything has changed,” Oput notes. “Our message is simple: Yes, the offices are open. The system is operational. Yes, this is going to work.”

Already Orlova says she’s seen signs of increased confidence among Ugandan citizens. Each month, rising numbers of Ugandans have walked through the MZO doors. At its onset, she says, the MZOs averaged about 400 transactions per month — in total over all six district offices. By spring, that number had jumped to 1,200, then 2,000. Today, the MZOs handle about 5,000 transactions each month.

“People are more and more certain that this isn’t something that will disappear anytime soon,” Orlova says. “They are starting to trust it.”