Research Article

Towards Sustainable Urban Land Governance in Ethiopia: A Cross-Regional Analysis of Institutional Capacity and Best Practices

Mitiku Alemayehu Emiru

Amhara National Regional State Land Bureau, Bahir Dar, Ethiopia

ABSTRACT

Urban land governance is a crucial component of effective urban development, particularly in rapidly urbanizing countries such as Ethiopia. However, the increasing demand for urban land, coupled with limited institutional capacity, poses significant challenges to land provision and administration. Despite these challenges, there is limited research on how Ethiopia can learn from international best practices to strengthen its urban land governance systems. This study addresses this gap by examining the institutional capacity challenges in Ethiopia's urban land governance and proposing solutions informed by best practices from selected Asian and African countries. Employing a comparative qualitative approach, the research analyzes case studies from South Korea, Singapore, Kenya, and Ghana to extract lessons and strategies for improving land governance. The findings reveal that Ethiopia's urban land governance is constrained by weak inter-agency coordination, insufficient leadership and technical capacity, and bureaucratic inefficiencies, which hinder effective land management and urban development. Based on these findings, the study concludes with policy recommendations for strengthening Ethiopia's urban land governance. These include enhancing institutional coordination through the establishment of inter-agency platforms, investing in technology and human resource capacity, integrating technology into land management processes, fostering active community participation in decision-making, and implementing comprehensive training programs for local officials. Additionally, the research highlights the importance of establishing clear legal frameworks and implementing streamlined land registration processes to enhance efficiency and transparency. These insights not only contribute to Ethiopia's urban development policies but also provide a roadmap for achieving sustainable urban land administration, with potential implications for other developing countries facing similar challenges.

*CORRESPONDING AUTHOR

Mitiku Alemayehu Emiru, Amhara National Regional State Land Bureau, Bahir Dar, Ethiopia, Ghana; Email: mitikuam@gmail.com

1. Introduction

The rapid urbanization of Ethiopia over the past few decades has created both opportunities and challenges for its cities. With urban populations increasing due to population growth and rural-to-urban migration, Ethiopia faces considerable pressure on its urban land resources. The increasing demand for land has exposed weaknesses in Ethiopia's urban land administration and governance structures, which were initially designed for a much lower rate of urban growth. As urban areas expand, the need for a more efficient and transparent land governance system becomes increasingly apparent. Effective urban land administration is critical not only for managing land resources but also for ensuring equitable access to land and fostering sustainable urban development.

Urban land in Ethiopia holds significant economic, social, and political importance. It serves as the foundation for infrastructure, housing, and commercial development, all of which are vital for the economic growth of the nation. However, mismanagement of urban land often leads to conflict, informal land tenure, and irregular land transactions, all of which undermine the stability of urban growth and lead to socio-economic inequality. This has been observed in various rapidly urbanizing countries, where the challenges of land administration have been closely linked to governance failures, weak institutional capacity, and inefficient land market [1-2] .

The research explores the link between urban land management and good governance, emphasizing the role of government in ensuring sustainable development. Good governance in land management promotes economic growth, poverty reduction, and conflict prevention, while poor governance leads to corruption and mismanagement. The study highlights challenges in developing countries, including inadequate policies, lack of resources, and insufficient institutional capacity, and proposes an evaluation framework based on existing governance principles and indicators [3].

In comparison, countries like South Korea and Singapore, which have faced similar urbanization pressures, have developed institutional frameworks that emphasize efficient land use and governance. Korea faces demographic and economic challenges, including an ageing population, youth migration, and housing shortages, necessitating more efficient urban management. Land-use planning is crucial for promoting sustainable development, improving quality of life, and enhancing regional competitiveness. However, urban regeneration efforts vary across cities and regions, with different opportunities and strategies for change [4].

Moreover, Korea's land-use planning framework is hierarchical, with the Comprehensive National Land Plan (CNLP) guiding long-term development and spatial planning. Regional and local plans provide detailed guidelines, but rigid zoning regulations limit adaptability [4]. South Korea's land administration system has focused on effective inter-agency coordination, clear land laws, and technological integration, which have facilitated urban development without compromising fairness [5].

Singapore's land management system is globally recognized for its efficiency, transparency, and innovative land optimization strategies. To address its limited land supply, Singapore strategically relocates infrastructure—such as rail lines, pipelines, and utility networks—underground, with some highways also constructed below ground. A prominent example is the underground crude oil storage facility on Jurong Island, which frees up valuable surface land for development [6]. These measures reflect a deliberate approach to maximizing land use while maintaining urban functionality.

Central to Singapore's success is its transparent land registration system, which minimizes disputes and builds public trust. The integration of advanced technologies, like Geographic Information Systems (GIS), enables precise land mapping and supports data-driven planning. Additionally, Singapore effectively balances urban growth with sustainability through vertical development, integrated planning, and the preservation of green spaces. These

practices offer important lessons for countries like Ethiopia, demonstrating how strong governance, technological innovation, and strategic foresight can overcome land scarcity and support sustainable urban development [7].

In Africa, Kenya and Ghana provide contrasting examples of urban land governance challenges and solutions. Kenya has struggled with land fragmentation, corruption, and unclear land tenure, but recent reforms have focused on improving land governance through the use of technology and community involvement [8]. Ghana, on the other hand, has experienced challenges related to land disputes and inadequate land registration systems, but it has seen some success with land reforms that include the integration of customary land systems into formal governance structures [9]. Both countries highlight the importance of integrating local knowledge, technology, and legal frameworks to address urban land issues.

In Ethiopia, while reforms have been introduced to enhance urban land administration, institutional inefficiencies and the lack of inter-agency coordination remain major impediments to achieving effective land governance. The country's land tenure system, which is based on public ownership, complicates land transactions and governance, making it necessary to adapt international best practices to Ethiopia's unique context [10]. The challenge for Ethiopia, as observed in these case study countries, is how to adapt lessons learned from successful urban land governance models while accounting for local socio-political and economic realities. Ethiopia's land governance system must be reformed to integrate technology, improve coordination between institutions, streamline land registration processes, and encourage community participation in decision-making processes, ensuring equitable and sustainable urban development.

While much has been written about the challenges of urban land management in Ethiopia, few studies have systematically analyzed the role of institutional capacity in urban land provision and administration. Specifically, there is limited research comparing Ethiopian practices with successful models from other regions. Understanding how governance frameworks in Asia and Africa have tackled similar challenges could provide valuable insights for improving Ethiopian urban land governance.The objective of this study is twofold:

To assess the current state of institutional capacity in urban land governance in Ethiopia and identify governance-related challenges.

To explore best practices in urban land administration from Asian and African countries and evaluate how these can inform policy development in Ethiopia for sustainable urban development.

2. Research Methodology and Materials

This study employs a comparative qualitative research methodology, with a focus on secondary data sources to assess institutional capacity in urban land governance in Ethiopia. By analyzing case studies from selected countries in Asia and Africa that have faced similar urbanization challenges, the research aims to draw meaningful comparisons, identify best practices, and offer valuable lessons for Ethiopia's land administration reforms. The case study approach allows for an in-depth examination of how different institutional frameworks, governance strategies, and land management practices have been successfully implemented in other countries facing similar issues.

The methodology centres on understanding the institutional capacity challenges in urban land governance within Ethiopia by drawing on the experiences of countries with comparable urbanization dynamics. Secondary data from a wide range of materials, including academic literature, policy documents, government reports, and international case studies, form the primary sources for this research. The study synthesizes existing knowledge on urban land governance, focusing on institutional challenges, policy frameworks, and governance practices, to identify transferable lessons for Ethiopia.

2.1 Materials and Data Sources

This study primarily relies on secondary data collected from a variety of reputable sources. Key among these are policy documents, which include national urban development policies, land administration laws, and land management strategies implemented in Ethiopia and other case study countries. These documents provide essential insights into the legal frameworks governing urban land and offer a perspective on how these frameworks either support or hinder urban development in different contexts.

In addition to policy documents, the study reviews a range of academic literature, including peer-reviewed articles and books. These resources focus on urban land governance, institutional capacity, and land management reforms in countries such as South Korea, Singapore, Kenya, and Ghana. The literature contributes to a deeper understanding of the challenges and opportunities associated with land administration in rapidly urbanizing regions, highlighting key lessons that can be applied to other contexts.

Government reports also serve as a critical data source. Publications from government agencies in the case study countries are analyzed to gain insight into urban planning and land use management frameworks. These reports, including annual assessments from ministries responsible for urban development and land management, provide valuable information on the structure and effectiveness of land governance policies.

Lastly, the study incorporates international case studies, particularly from Asia and Africa, which are sourced from reputable international organizations such as the World Bank, UN-Habitat, and the African Development Bank (AfDB). These case studies offer detailed examples of successful urban land administration practices and institutional reforms, contributing to the comparative analysis and broader understanding of effective land governance strategies.

2.2 Countries Analyzed

The study utilizes secondary data from desk and document reviews to analyze urban land governance practices. Through qualitative methods, it examines case studies from four countries with comparable urbanization patterns and governance issues. These cases provide valuable insights into recurring challenges and innovative solutions. The approach supports identifying applicable strategies for improving Ethiopia's urban land governance. These countries were selected due to their similar urbanization dynamics and governance challenges:

- **South Korea**: Known for its rapid urbanization and innovative land-use management strategies, South Korea serves as an important model for institutional coordination and technological integration in urban land administration. The country's experience in streamlining land-use management provides valuable lessons in governance [11].

- **Singapore:** Singapore offers a highly integrated land governance model that effectively combines urban planning with transportation systems. The country's successful approach to land management demonstrates the benefits of cohesive governance strategies, technological innovation, and sustainability [12]. Moreover, Singapore's transparent land registration process minimizes disputes and enhances trust in the system, while its use of advanced technologies like GIS supports precise land mapping and planning. The country's ability to balance urban development with sustainability—through green spaces, vertical development, and integrated planning—offers valuable lessons for Ethiopia [7].

- **Kenya:** Kenya has made significant strides in improving land governance through the Land Use and Management Act. This legislation aims to streamline land transactions, reduce corruption, and enhance transparency. Kenya's experience is particularly relevant for addressing land administration issues in developing countries [13].

- **Ghana:** Ghana's community-based land administration system is an example of how decentralized governance can enhance transparency and resolve land disputes. The system emphasizes local participation, which can serve as a model for community-driven land management [14].

2.3 Data Analysis

This analysis relies on secondary data gathered through desk reviews and qualitative analysis to examine urban land governance practices. It focuses on case studies from four countries that have tackled similar institutional challenges. Using qualitative content analysis, the research identifies recurring themes, challenges, and effective strategies. A structured approach guides the synthesis of data to inform improvements in Ethiopia's institutional capacity:

- **Theme Identification:** Key themes are identified across the case studies and literature, including institutional capacity, the coordination of government agencies, land-use policy frameworks, technological integration, and community engagement. These themes form the basis for a detailed examination of the institutional challenges and opportunities in land governance.

- **Comparative Analysis:** The study compares the institutional frameworks and governance practices in the case study countries with those in Ethiopia. This comparison is structured around several dimensions, such as the legal and regulatory frameworks, inter-agency coordination, technological adoption, and public participation in land administration.

- **Synthesis of Findings:** The findings from the case studies are synthesized to highlight best practices that can be applied to Ethiopia's urban land governance challenges. The research evaluates how these practices have been successfully implemented in other countries and assesses their applicability in the Ethiopian context.

By focusing solely on secondary data, this study offers a broader understanding of urban land governance by drawing on the experiences of multiple countries. It provides a solid foundation for developing policy recommendations and suggests practical reforms that can help Ethiopia address its urban land governance challenges.

3. Results and Key Findings

This section analyzes institutional challenges in Ethiopia's urban land governance and explores adaptable best practices from selected Asian and African countries to strengthen its capacity.

3.1 Institutional Capacity Challenges in Ethiopia

Ethiopia's urban land governance is hindered by weak institutional coordination, limited technical capacity, and bureaucratic inefficiencies, affecting effective land administration and urban development. These challenges are analysied as detailed:

- **Weak Coordination Between Institutions**

In Ethiopia, one of the most significant challenges is the lack of communication and coordination between various institutions involved in land administration. The Ministry of Urban Development is tasked with overseeing urban land issues, but other key land-related entities, such as local municipalities, urban planning agencies, and the Ministry of Agriculture, often work in silos. This fragmentation leads to inefficiencies, delays in land allocation, and conflicts in urban planning policies [15].

- **Inadequate Technical Capacity**

Another critical challenge in urban Ethiopia is the lack of technical capacity among local government officials. Many urban planners and land officers at the local level lack the requisite skills and training in land management, urban planning, and legal frameworks. This deficiency in human resource capacity contributes to poor implementation of urban land policies and the failure to effectively address urban land challenges [16].

- **Bureaucratic Inefficiencies**

Bureaucratic inefficiencies in land allocation and registration processes are also a significant issue. The land registration and titling systems are slow and cumbersome, leading to delays in urban development projects. The lengthy process of acquiring land rights or registering land transactions discourages private investment and hampers economic growth in urban areas [17].

3.2 Asian and African Best Practices

Several Asian and African countries offer effective urban land governance models, providing valuable lessons Ethiopia can adapt to strengthen its land administration capacity.

1) **South Korea: Clear Legal Frameworks and Institutional Coordination**

South Korea offers a comprehensive approach to urban land governance. A key feature of the country's success is the establishment of clear legal frameworks that regulate urban land use, particularly through its "Land Use Zoning and Urban Renewal" system. This system provides clear land-use guidelines, streamlines planning processes, and facilitates coordination between national and local authorities [5].

The country has also excelled in ensuring strong coordination among various government agencies, which has led to more efficient land management practices. At the national level, the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, and Transport works closely with local municipalities to ensure alignment between urban planning policies and land-use regulations, reducing fragmentation in land governance [18].

2) **Singapore: Integrated Urban Planning and Technology Utilization**

Singapore has pioneered integrated urban planning and land management, especially through the collaboration of its Land Transport Authority (LTA) and the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA). The integration of land-use planning with transportation policies has resulted in efficient urban development and reduced congestion. Singapore also makes extensive use of Geographic Information Systems (GIS) for land mapping, urban planning, and data analysis. This technological integration enhances the accuracy of land data and facilitates real-time decision-making for land development and management [12].

Furthermore, Singapore's urban planning strategies emphasize sustainability, with policies designed to create green spaces, improve housing affordability, and manage urban growth in an environmentally responsible manner [19].

3) Kenya: Land Use and Management Act

Kenya has made significant strides in improving its land governance by implementing the Land Use and Management Act. This legislation has provided a clear framework for land rights and ownership, making land transactions more transparent and reducing the potential for corruption. The act also promotes a more efficient land titling process, which has helped facilitate the growth of both urban and rural areas. The establishment of a land registry system in Kenya has helped track land ownership and reduce disputes [13].

Kenya's adoption of a land use framework that incorporates participatory decision-making processes also fosters greater transparency, as citizens have a voice in how land is allocated and managed within their communities [20].

4) Ghana: Community-Based Land Administration

Ghana has implemented a community-based land administration system that emphasizes decentralization and community involvement. This system empowers local communities to manage and make decisions about land use, which reduces land disputes and ensures more equitable land distribution. Community-based land governance models like this one help ensure that land management decisions are inclusive, transparent, and responsive to local needs. The success of this approach has made Ghana a leader in community-based land administration in Africa [14].

4. Applicability of Best Practices to Ethiopia

Ethiopia can adapt and implement several best practices from countries such as South Korea, Singapore, Kenya, and Ghana to overcome its urban land governance challenges and strengthen its institutional capacity. One key mechanism involves *strengthening inter-agency coordination*. Ethiopia could establish formal platforms for coordination among the various agencies involved in urban land governance, such as the Ministry of Urban and Infrastructure Development, local municipalities, urban planning agencies, and the Ministry of Agriculture. Drawing from South Korea's success in inter-agency coordination, Ethiopia could align urban land management efforts across different levels of government, leading to a more efficient and unified land administration system [7].

Another area for improvement is *enhancing technical capacity*. To address the current lack of technical skills, Ethiopia could implement comprehensive training programs for urban planners, land officers, and local government officials. These programs should focus on land management best practices, legal frameworks, and the integration of technology in urban planning. By adopting Singapore's use of GIS technology for land mapping, Ethiopia could equip its officials with the necessary tools and skills for modern, data-driven urban land management [12].

Integrating technology for land management is another important strategy. The adoption of Geographic Information Systems (GIS) technology for land administration could streamline Ethiopia's land allocation processes, making them faster and more efficient. By improving urban land mapping and registration, Ethiopia could reduce administrative delays and increase transparency. Digital land management tools, similar to those in Singapore, would modernize Ethiopia's land administration system [19] .

Lastly, Ethiopia could benefit from *promoting community participation* in land governance, drawing from Ghana's community-based land administration system. By involving local communities in the land decision-making process, Ethiopia can foster a more inclusive, transparent, and equitable approach to land management. Establishing community-based land committees would empower citizens to actively participate in land allocation and conflict resolution, helping to ensure that land governance is both effective and just [14].

By adapting these best practices, Ethiopia could address many of the challenges in its urban land governance system, creating a more efficient, transparent, and inclusive land administration framework.

5. Conclusion & Recommendations

Ethiopia's urban land governance faces significant institutional capacity challenges, particularly in terms of weak coordination between agencies, inadequate technical capacity, and bureaucratic inefficiencies. These challenges hinder the effective implementation of land management policies and slow down urban development processes. However, by drawing lessons from successful case studies in South Korea, Singapore, Kenya, and Ghana, Ethiopia can identify key strategies that could be adapted to improve its urban land governance system.

The best practices from these countries offer valuable insights into the importance of clear legal frameworks, strong institutional coordination, the integration of technology, and the active involvement of local communities. For instance, South Korea's emphasis on legal clarity and institutional coordination has led to more streamlined urban planning processes, while Singapore's use of GIS technology has enabled efficient urban land management. Similarly, Kenya's adoption of a comprehensive land use and management framework and Ghana's community-based land administration system provide important models for transparency, accountability, and participatory decision-making.

The applicability of these practices to Ethiopia's context suggests that there are several reforms that can be undertaken to enhance institutional capacity and promote sustainable urban development. These reforms should focus on strengthening inter-agency coordination, enhancing technical skills and expertise, integrating technology into land management processes, and promoting community participation in land governance.

Based on the findings of this study, it is imperative that Ethiopia takes decisive and transformative actions to enhance institutional capacity in urban land governance. The following recommendations are not merely suggestions but essential steps that must be prioritized to address the systemic challenges hindering effective urban land management and to unlock the potential for sustainable urban development:

o **Strengthening Inter-Agency Coordination:** To overcome the current fragmentation in urban land governance, Ethiopia must urgently establish formal platforms or inter-agency committees that foster communication and coordination among key stakeholders such as the Ministry of urban developmen and infrastructure, local municipalities, urban planning agencies, and the Ministry of Agriculture. Regular consultations and collaborative decision-making processes, as effectively implemented in South Korea, should be adopted to align urban planning policies and streamline land administration across various government levels. Such a step is critical to ensuring a more coherent and efficient governance structure.

o   **Enhancing Technical Capacity:** Ethiopia must prioritize training programs for urban planners, land officers, and local government officials, focusing on urban land governance best practices, legal frameworks, land management tools, and technologies like Geographic Information Systems (GIS). Building technical expertise is crucial for improving land management and policy implementation. To address capacity gaps, Ethiopia should collaborate with international organizations and urban planning experts, adopting global best practices. Notably, integrating Singapore's GIS technology, as highlighted by [12], can modernize Ethiopia's urban governance by enhancing urban planning efficiency and decision-making.

o **Integrating Technology for Efficient Land Management:** The adoption of modern technologies, such as GIS, is no longer optional but a necessity for Ethiopia to streamline land administration processes. The integration of GIS for land mapping, data analysis, and urban planning, as demonstrated by Singapore, can significantly enhance the accuracy of land data, reduce disputes, and improve the efficiency of land allocation and registration systems. Ethiopia must establish a digital land registry and invest in the necessary technology infrastructure to modernize land management, enhance transparency, and build public trust in the system.

o **Promoting Community Participation in Land Governance:** Ethiopia must adopt a participatory approach to land governance, drawing inspiration from Ghana's community-based land administration system. Engaging local communities in land decision-making processes is essential to increase transparency, reduce land disputes, and ensure that land policies reflect the needs and aspirations of the people. Ethiopia should create inclusive platforms for community involvement in urban planning and land allocation, fostering a sense of ownership and ensuring equitable land distribution. Without community participation, land governance reforms risk being perceived as top-down and disconnected from local realities.

o **Reforming Land Titling and Registration Systems**: Ethiopia must urgently address the bureaucratic inefficiencies plaguing its land titling and registration systems. Simplifying land transaction processes and reducing the time required for registration are critical steps to encourage investment in urban areas and accelerate urban development. Drawing on Kenya's success with the Land Use and Management Act, Ethiopia should implement a more efficient and transparent land registration system. This will not only improve land tenure security for citizens but also reduce opportunities for corruption, which remains a significant challenge in the current system.

o **Developing Clear Legal and Policy Frameworks:** Ethiopia must develop and enforce clear, consistent, and forward-looking legal and policy frameworks for urban land governance. Existing laws must be updated to reflect modern urbanization trends and incorporate sustainable land-use practices. The experience of South Korea in creating a cohesive legal framework for land management and urban renewal offers valuable lessons for Ethiopia. Without a robust legal and policy foundation, efforts to improve urban land governance will lack the necessary authority and consistency to drive meaningful change.

Finally, the successful reform of urban land governance in Ethiopia requires a multi-faceted approach that integrates institutional reforms, capacity-building, technological advancements, and community engagement. By adopting the best practices from countries like South Korea, Singapore, Kenya, and Ghana. Ethiopia can overcome its land governance challenges and create a more efficient, transparent, and inclusive urban land administration system. These reforms will not only improve urban planning but also contribute to sustainable urban development, enhancing the quality of life for urban residents and fostering economic growth across the country. Therefore, the stakes are high, and the window of opportunity is narrowing; Ethiopia must act now.

6. Limitations of the Study

This study is constrained by its reliance on secondary data and a limited timeframe, which may restrict the depth of analysis. Additionally, contextual differences may affect the direct transferability of international best practices. However, these limitations do not lessen the value of the findings. Instead, the study offers meaningful insights into the interplay between urban land governance and institutional capacity in Ethiopia, and establishes a solid foundation for future, more comprehensive research to support integrated and equitable urban land governance.

Author's Contribution

Mitiku Alemayehu Emiru (PhD) prepared the initial draft and was responsible for all data-related tasks, including collection and analysis. He also contributed to the development of the methodology, data review, editing, and overall supervision. The final manuscript was approved by him.

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Data Availability

This study relies on qualitative secondary data, including policy documents, government reports, and academic literature, to analyze land governance in South Korea, Singapore, Kenya, and Ghana. The data sources include: No primary datasets were generated; all referenced materials are publicly available through institutional websites, academic databases, or cited publications. Processed findings are presented in the manuscript and supplementary materials. For further details, sources are fully cited in the references section.

Conflicts of Interest

I do not have any competing financial interests or any personal relationships that could have had an impact on the work published in this article. There is no conflict of interest; this is only my original work, and all other materials used have been duly acknowledged in the text.

Ethics Declaration

This study did not involve direct experimentation on human or animal subjects. All data used were secondary, publicly available, or obtained with appropriate institutional permission. Ethical guidelines for research involving human data were strictly followed, and confidentiality and data privacy were maintained throughout. Clinical trial registration number is not applicable as this study does not involve a clinical trial.

Consent to Participate Declaration

This study did not involve direct participation of human subjects, and thus individual consent was not required. However, for the use of unpublished municipal report data, formal institutional consent was obtained via a written letter of permission from the different land sectors.

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