



## Municipal Commonage: an Undervalued National Resource

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

#### *What is municipal commonage?*

There are two types of municipal commonage. The first is traditional commonage. This refers to land found adjacent to small towns that was granted by the state (mainly in the 1800s during the formal establishment of towns) for the use and benefits of residents and administered by the urban authority (Atkinson and Buscher, 2006). The second is new commonage that refers to land purchased after independence in 1994, by the former Department of Land Affairs (DLA) from commercial farmers as part of South Africa's land reform programme and handed over to the respective municipality to manage (DLA, 1997a).

According to current national policy, the main aim of traditional commonage is to grant previously disadvantaged poor urban people (or newly migrated rural ones) access to land to supplement their income and enhance household food security (DLA, 1997b). In contrast, new commonage aims to make land available to emergent farmers from a disadvantaged background so that they can practice farming to improve their standard of living (DLA, 2002). The emergent farmer system is seen as a stepping-stone for farmers who want to produce for the market and eventually purchase their own land for commercial purposes (DLA, 2002).

This policy brief will highlight the importance of municipal commonage in enhancing livelihoods of poor urban families. This will be followed by an overview of the role of municipal commonage in the land reform programme. Current challenges in securing benefits from municipal commonages are then outlined. Policy considerations to optimise benefits from commonages conclude the policy brief.

### 2. IMPORTANCE OF MUNICIPAL COMMONAGE

High levels of unemployment, poverty and inequitable access to land especially by the black majority population are key challenges in South Africa. This is partly a legacy of past discriminatory policies and laws that



denied the black population access to land during the colonial and apartheid eras. Prior to independence in 1994, municipal commonage was only offered to white farmers and urban residents to enhance their livelihoods.

With the advent of democracy in 1994, the ANC government introduced policies that made municipal commonage accessible to poor urban people from historically disadvantaged backgrounds. Traditional commonage was seen as a way of improving the livelihoods of poor urban people while new commonage was seen as a stepping stone to commercial farming.

Work in the Eastern Cape shows that between 27 % and 70 % of urban households used municipal commonage. Key resources used are fuelwood, medicinal plants and grazing for livestock (Figure 1).

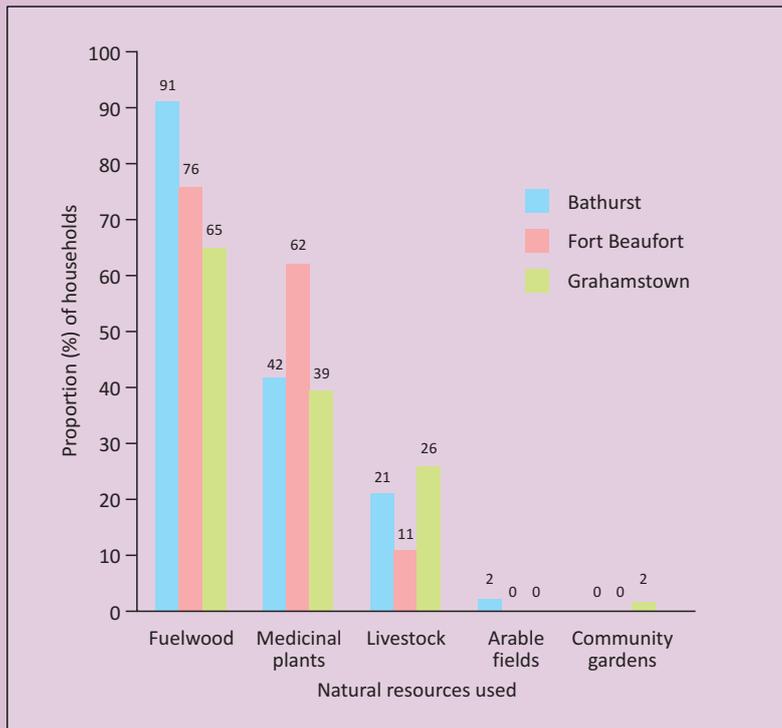


Figure 1. Resources used by commonage user households in three towns in the Eastern Cape. (Source: Davenport *et al.*, 2011)

The majority of households have used municipal commonage for less than 10 years. This may be partly explained by increasing levels of urbanization and poverty since the mid-1990s. Tellingly, approximately half (41 – 57 %) of those using municipal commonage are living below the poverty datum line. Most importantly, recent work shows that 11 % to 13 % additional households would be living below the poverty line if contributions from municipal commonages were not available to them; a clear demonstration of the importance of municipal commonages to the urban poor.

Commonage-using households can be divided into four livelihood types:

1. The urban poor who engage in a diverse range of livelihood activities, including casual wage labour, social grants, remittances and regular collection of commonage resources. The latter contributes more than 30 % of their total livelihood, made up from multiple resources such as fuelwood, grazing, medicinal plants, building timber and so on.
2. Social grant dependent households who receive more than 80 % of their income from social grants and supplement this with use of commonage resources (11 % of income).
3. Employment dependent households who obtain more than 80 % of household income as cash from wages, salaries and self-employment. They make only limited and ad hoc use of commonage

resources, typically for grazing of livestock.

4. Households who are more or less equally reliant on employment income and income from social grants. They make only limited and ad hoc use of commonage resources.

### **3. ROLE OF MUNICIPAL COMMONAGE IN THE LAND REFORM PROGRAMME**

The aims of the land reform programme in South Africa are to: (a) give local people access to land, (b) create livelihood opportunities and (c) develop the local economy (May and Lahiff, 2007). The DLA (1997a,b) identifies municipal commonage as the pillar of the land reform programme because it is public land with an existing institution to manage it. Thus, the largest transfer of land from any one programme within the national land redistribution programme is that of municipal commonage. The beneficiaries of the reform programme include poor and previously disadvantaged people.

### **4. CURRENT CHALLENGES IN SECURING BENEFITS FROM MUNICIPAL COMMONAGES**

#### ***4.1 Weak demarcation and knowledge on extent of commonage***

Despite the significance of municipal commonage in the land reform programme and its contribution to livelihoods of the urban poor, the extent of municipal commonage is unknown nationally. In many instances local authorities are uncertain of the precise boundaries of the municipal commonage purportedly under their care. There is an urgent need for an audit of the extent of municipal commonage around each town, provincially and nationally, if it is to be managed productively and wisely to secure and enhance its contributions to the livelihoods of poor people.

#### ***4.2 Insufficient recognition of the potential role of commonages in poverty mitigation***

There is a lack of national and local authority recognition of the role of commonages in poverty mitigation. Commonages are used extensively by the urban poor but are not managed for such by the local municipalities. Over 10 % more urban households would fall below the poverty line if commonage resources were diminished or made inaccessible to them.

#### ***4.3 Domination of use by local elites***

Local elites may dominate the use of municipal commonages leading to unequal sharing of benefits from commonages. This is particularly common among livestock owners. Owners with large herds of cattle tend to occupy key positions within local institutions such as the livestock management associations. The local elites tend to wield more power than other members of the association. There is little evidence of emergent and reasonably wealthy farmers exiting from commonage land once they have sufficient capital to do so.

#### ***4.4 Excessive stocking rates***

Challenges in the management of municipal commonages include excessive stocking rates. There is evidence of overgrazing and bush encroachment on some municipal commonages (e.g. Puttick, 2008).

Local municipalities are required to monitor the number of livestock on municipal commonages and charge appropriate grazing fees. However, in many instances livestock owners resist paying grazing fees, even those with large herds on commonage land (Davenport and Gambiza, 2009), arguing that they cannot pay fees when there is no infrastructure for livestock provided by the municipalities. Municipalities suggest in turn, that they cannot put up infrastructure and manage the commonage if livestock owners refuse to pay the fees. Furthermore, few municipalities have any records of livestock kept on commonages.

#### ***4.5 Absent or inadequate management plans***

There are two important challenges in the management of municipal commonages. First, there is an over-emphasis on livestock in the management of municipal commonages. For example, Davenport and Gambiza (2009) showed that municipalities largely interact with livestock owners when managing

commonages. In contrast, although fuelwood and medicinal plants are key resources for the urban poor that are harvested from commonages, the municipalities rarely interact with these user groups. Second, most municipalities do not have natural resource management plans. There is a need for holistic management plans to promote sustainable management of commonages and to capture and secure their value for poor urban residents. It is necessary to include the full range of resources and ecosystem services, rather than focusing largely on livestock, when devising management plans.

#### **4.6 *Insufficient capacity in municipalities to manage commonage***

Municipalities are required to manage the commonages. However, they face critical shortages of personnel with skills in natural resource management and agriculture. This has resulted in a lack of management plans, poor maintenance of infrastructure on commonages, and limited vision on how to ensure commonages contribute to the livelihoods of the poor.

### **5. POLICY CONSIDERATIONS TO OPTIMIZE BENEFITS FROM COMMONAGES**

The following key policy considerations are necessary to improve sustainable management of municipal commonages.

#### **5.1. *Carry out an audit on the extent and use of municipal commonages***

As there are no clear estimates of the extent of municipal commonage, it is necessary that local authorities undertake an audit of the extent, and determine the exact boundaries, of the land under their control. These should then be aggregated by district municipality and province, which will allow the compilation of a national database. These audits should be carried out under the guidance of the National Department of Land Affairs.

#### **5.2. *Assess the state of commonages and the needs of the primary user groups***

Once the location and extent of municipal commonage has been determined, a further audit is required of the state and use of each commonage. This should include a census of the number of livestock and determination of who owns the livestock. The supply and demand of commonage resources such as fuelwood, medicinal plants and land for cropping should be assessed.

#### **5.3. *Implement sound grazing management systems and a grazing fee for livestock owners with sufficient stock***

Local municipalities can only provide services on a sustainable basis if there are sufficient revenue streams to support the services rendered or if they are subsidized nationally. Consequently, grazing fees should be implemented for livestock owners who have herds of more than ten animals. Municipalities should implement mechanisms for a regular count of livestock numbers on commonage land and to levy the agreed fees. These revenues should then be used to improve the condition and management of commonages.

#### **5.4. *Develop capacity within municipalities to manage commonages***

Very few municipalities currently have sufficient capacity to actively manage the commonage lands under their jurisdiction. Most have a hands-off approach until a specific issue is raised in the local media and then a reactive solution is considered. Consequently, the supply of resources and ecosystem services is well below optimal. A more active and adaptive management approach will improve the supply of resources and hence assist in the poverty alleviation mandate of local authorities. Consequently, municipalities need to be made aware of the value of the municipal commonages under their control and then to allocate sufficiently skilled staff and budget to ensure the value is secured and provides optimal returns and benefit flows to local residents, especially the urban poor.

### **5.5. Promote adaptive co-management to encourage participation of users in the management of commonages**

Municipal commonages supply a diverse array of resources and are used by a range of different constituencies. Therefore, it is important that any management plan and system takes into account these diverse needs and does not focus on one at the expense of all others. This can be achieved by the development and empowerment of co-management structures between municipal officials and local user groups.

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