



# Catalyzing Innovation

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## THE LAND RESEARCH CAPACITY OF AFRICA: NEW RESEARCH CENTRE CONCEPT FOR CATALYSING IMPROVED LAND GOVERNANCE

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## ABSTRACT

This article explores a renewed approach to research centre. It uses desktop review and interviews with key informants from African universities to investigate the specific features that should characterise a research centre on land governance in Africa. The investigation also focuses on how to package and implement research centre concepts in land governance. It uses the *SCImago Journal Rank* platform to access data and analyse (and present) the research capacity country rankings of top 10 countries in Africa, as a way of understanding how African countries rank in general research outputs and in specific land governance subjects. It also deals on how to operationalise research centres in land governance to enable improved African-wide research outcomes. By way of an outcome, the article presents a new research centre concept for catalysing innovative research (learning) in land governance.

**Key Words:** Africa, innovative learning, land, land governance, research capacity, research centre, transformation, NELGA



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## 1. BACKGROUND

### 1.1 Challenge of innovative research and training on land governance in Africa

The era of land abundance is over, and land challenges are numerous in Africa (see Chigbu, 2019a-b; Ntihinyurwa et al., 2019; Chigbu, Paradza & Dachaga, 2019). Conflicting interests of land users have been rising over the past decades. Given the growing economic, environmental and political pressures, and food security challenges in the continent, there is need for urgent response towards addressing these challenges. Responses to current land related problems in Africa cannot be made without evidence based and innovative research (and training), policies and good practice on land governance in the continent. The reason is because these problems manifest in different forms: including rural (Chigbu, 2013), gender (Paradza, 2010), health (Chigbu & Ntiador, 2014), women (Chigbu, 2015), land tenure (Makura-Paradza, 2010), governance and approaches (de Vries & Chigbu, 2017), cultural practices (Ntihinyurwa et al., 2019), among many others. Despite the several university-based and independent research institutions (centres) that exist in the continent, only very little research time is dedicated to land governance practices and policies in the continent (Chigbu, Tenadu & Mwasumbi, 2017). It is not surprising to note that more research is being done on (or about) Africa from outside Africa. Again, this is not surprising due to the issue of research excellence which “has become a fashionable policy-relevant concept in the world of science funding and assessment” and “is influenced by political considerations and also by the varied social, cultural, and organisational environments in which researchers and scholars have to operate” (Tijssen & Kraemer-Mbula, 2018: 392). Equally concerning is the limited impact that research outputs have on land governance practise in Africa. Hence, there is need for a research centre concept (and agenda) capable of catalysing innovative research, policies and good practice on land governance in Africa.

“Land governance can be seen as emphasizing the interaction between structure and agency at different levels in resolving land matters within a political economy framework” (Lee et al., 2017: 5). It “ruminates more intensely on the matter of the rules, processes and structures about land and its use and concern about who made decisions and how implemented and enforced” (Lee, de Vries & Chigbu, 2019: 26). African-wide responses to the challenge of achieving innovative research



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and policies on land governance are relatively new. Although there have been various initiatives at different levels over the years, the Africa Land Policy Initiative (now African Land Policy Centre) was the first institution to launch a holistic and comprehensive programme in generating and disseminating land governance knowledge. The ALPC recognised that “Good quality research on land [...] is essential for the contextualisation, analysis and understanding of key land issues, the achievements and shortcomings of existing land administration policies, systems and programmes” (Africa Land Policy Initiative, 2016a: 51). This was supported by the development of a curricula guideline on land governance (Africa Land Policy Initiative, 2016b). Several approaches have since emerged from the Africa Land Policy Initiative in the development of land governance knowledge and capacities in Africa. These include the Network of Excellence on Land Governance in Africa (NELGA, 2018) which is one of the responses from Deutsche Gesellschaft für International Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) programme, Strengthening Capacities for Land Governance in Africa. Emerging from NELGA is the ADLAND model “which advances the concept and praxis of responsible and smart land management, in the context of, and for, being able to address the African land policy needs” (Chigbu et al., 2018: 4).

At the centre of the current response to land governance in Africa is the issue of excellence, hence, the designation of some universities as the NELGA nodes in the continent. This is Africa’s way of embracing education and research excellence, which has become a “fashionable research and policy relevant concept in the world of science funding and assessment” (Tijssen & Kraemer-Mbula, 2018: 392). The meaning of research *Excellency* (and its implementation in research practice and management) is influenced by political considerations and by the varied social, cultural, and organisational environments in which researchers and scholars have to operate. The concept of “excellence” with regards to Africa land governance is still to be unpacked (the issue of “excellency” is best left for another article). Unfortunately, there is no agreement on what constitutes excellence in Africa. Given the rise of capacity development initiatives to promote excellence in land governance in Africa, there is need to convince policymakers with transferable evidence on how performance outcomes can occur. This is a missing knowledge in the ongoing attempts to enshrine excellence in land governance in Africa. Noting this gap, several academic and learning programs have been established in African Higher Education systems to ensure



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improved learning about land subjects in university and other tertiary institutions. What about a specific dedication to land governance research and how to link research outputs to policy implementation?

This article focuses on the need to ensure specific dedication to land governance research by exploring a renewed approach to research centre concepts that enable the linking of research outputs to policy implementation. Apart from its introduction, the article approaches the subject by firstly presenting its methodology. Second, it delves into answering the question of why improved research capacity in land governance (and related areas) is essential for contributing to development in Africa. It also presents the argument on why more research capacity is required in the area of land governance, particularly from the lens of research centres. Third, it describes what an ideal research centre concept for improving the research-capacity-in-land-governance situation in Africa could be. Fourth (and finally), it reflects and concludes.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

The study presented in this article used data collected from desktop review of academic and grey literature (with focus on Africa-specific land issues). Of importance in the desktop research is the visualisation of research capacity of African countries by using data from *SCImago Journal Rank* website.<sup>1</sup> It uses the *SCImago Journal Rank* platform to access data and analyse (and present) the research capacity country rankings of top 10 countries in Africa, as a way of understanding how African countries rank in general research outputs and in specific land governance subjects. The *SCImago Journal Rank* provides research output rankings based in 27 major thematic areas, 313 subject category or by country. Citation data is drawn from over 34,100 titles from more than 5,000 international publishers and country performance metrics from 239 countries (and territories) worldwide.

In addition, 8 key informants were purposively selected from African universities (and research performing organisations and policymaking organisations) to investigate the specific features that should characterise a research centre on land governance. The investigation also focused on how

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<sup>1</sup> For details about *Scimago Journal & Country Rank*, visit <https://www.scimagojr.com/index.php>



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to package and implement research centre concepts in land governance in Africa. The key research questions relate to what a research centre in land governance should be in an African context. It also deals on how to objectify and operationalise research centres in land governance to enable African-wide outcomes. The feedbacks from the interviewees led to the formulation of an innovative research centre concept — in terms of needs, characteristics and approach to research and capacity development delivery — for catalysing innovative African research, policies, and good practice on land governance. The authors propose a structured, theoretically and policy grounded research centre concept that can ensure excellence in ongoing activities in land governance in Africa. The proposed research centre concept caters for a transformative approach to research and education within academic and non-academic environments.

This study has some limitations. Its focus on academic results does not reflect knowledge generation and research capacity of non-academic outputs such as speeches, policy briefs, blogs and media articles that are disseminated through other platforms.

### **3. RESEARCH CAPACITY OF AFRICA: A SNAPSHOT OF THE ISSUE**

All other matters aside, Africa has a serious land problem (see Chigbu, Chigbu & Onyekwelu, 2012; Benzko et al., 2017; Ameyaw et al., 2018; Chigbu, Alemayehu, & Dachaga, 2019). It has one of the greatest burdens of gender inequality in land. It also has a serious lack of land professionals to engage in tackling the many land related challenges in the continent (Fonn, 2006; Paradza, 2010; Paradza, 2011; Chigbu et al., 2018; Ameyaw et al., 2018; Ntihinyurwa et al., 2019; Chigbu, 2019a-b). For details on the many land challenges Africa faces, see The African Union's "Framework and Guidelines on land policy in Africa" (AUC-ECA-AfDB Consortium, 2010). Over-reliance on development aid to fund initiatives to address the land challenges also mean that sometimes vertical solutions have been used to tackle horizontal problems (Davies and Mullan, 2016). Africa carries a disproportionate burden land challenges and its land tenure systems under perform to the benefits of its few elites. Land interventions that are culturally embedded in the everyday practices of many communities have proven to be inadequate in creating impacts that would benefit the many populations in need of livelihood lifelines. What makes the challenge even



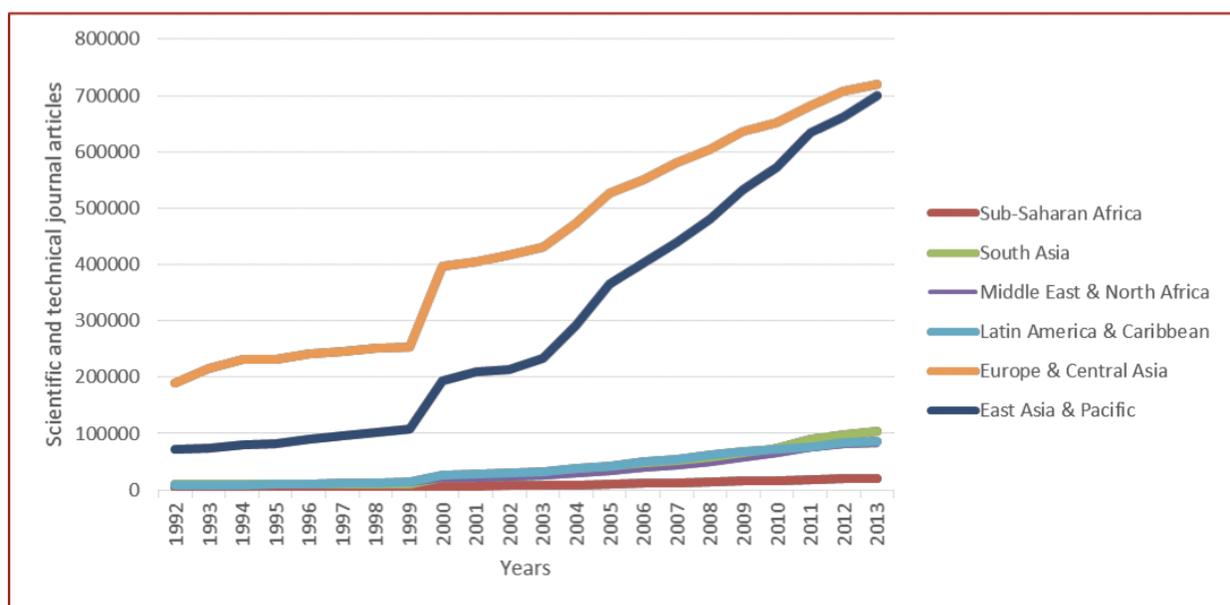
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more daunting is that there is still a lot that is not known about land challenges in Africa. This is what makes research a centre-point for building sustainable land governance in the continent.

It is a challenge to find evidence for measuring the research capacity in Africa, specific data on research in land is difficult to find. However, general data on research capacity on different land related areas shows that Africa relies on “overseas collaboration and visiting academics for a steep share of its research output” (African Capacity Building Foundation, 2017; Nnadozie, 2017: p.3). About 40-80% of Africa’s science and technology innovation publications are with external partners — “mostly in health and agriculture, of most interest to international donors” (Nnadozie, 2017: p.3). This has repercussions to Africa. Various aspects of land governance — including mineral governance, environment, land management and land administration; and spatial planning and development — are still highly under researched. This also means that the heavy influence from outside institutions (especially donor organisations) dissuades African researchers from tapping looking within local research communities, building capacity of local expertise and designing context specific and relevant research outputs. “Inter-African collaborations are just 2 percent, 2.9 percent, and 0.9 percent of all East African, Southern African, and West and Central African output” (African Capacity Building Foundation, 2017; Nnadozie, 2017: p.4).





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Figure 1: Number of African publications in comparison to other regions (1992-2013) (World Bank, 2016)

Inter-African collaborations are weak because (apart from the problem of heavy external influence) many African researchers prefer to associate with researchers from non-African institutions for research publications than with their African colleagues. The lack of funding commitments from most African government institutions for research also contributes to low inter-African collaborations. A critical look at the available data on research in general shows that, when compared to other regions, research output (quantified by the number of scientific articles published in scientific and technical journals) is increasing at a very low pace in Africa (see Figure 1). “While research outputs are growing at around 89% in regions like East Asia and the Pacific as well as Europe and Central Asia, it is almost stagnant in Africa.

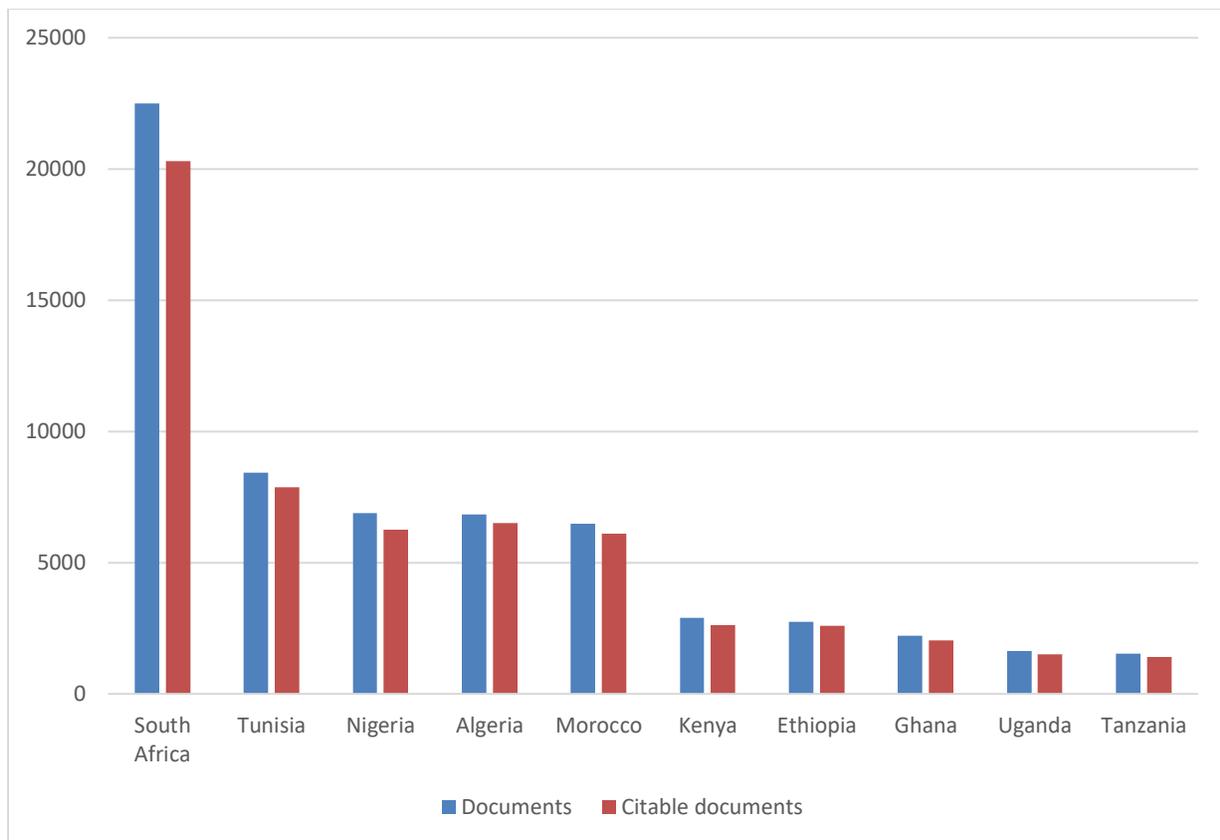


Figure 2: Top 10 publication ranking in all subjects in 2017 (based on data from SCImago Journal Rank, 2019)

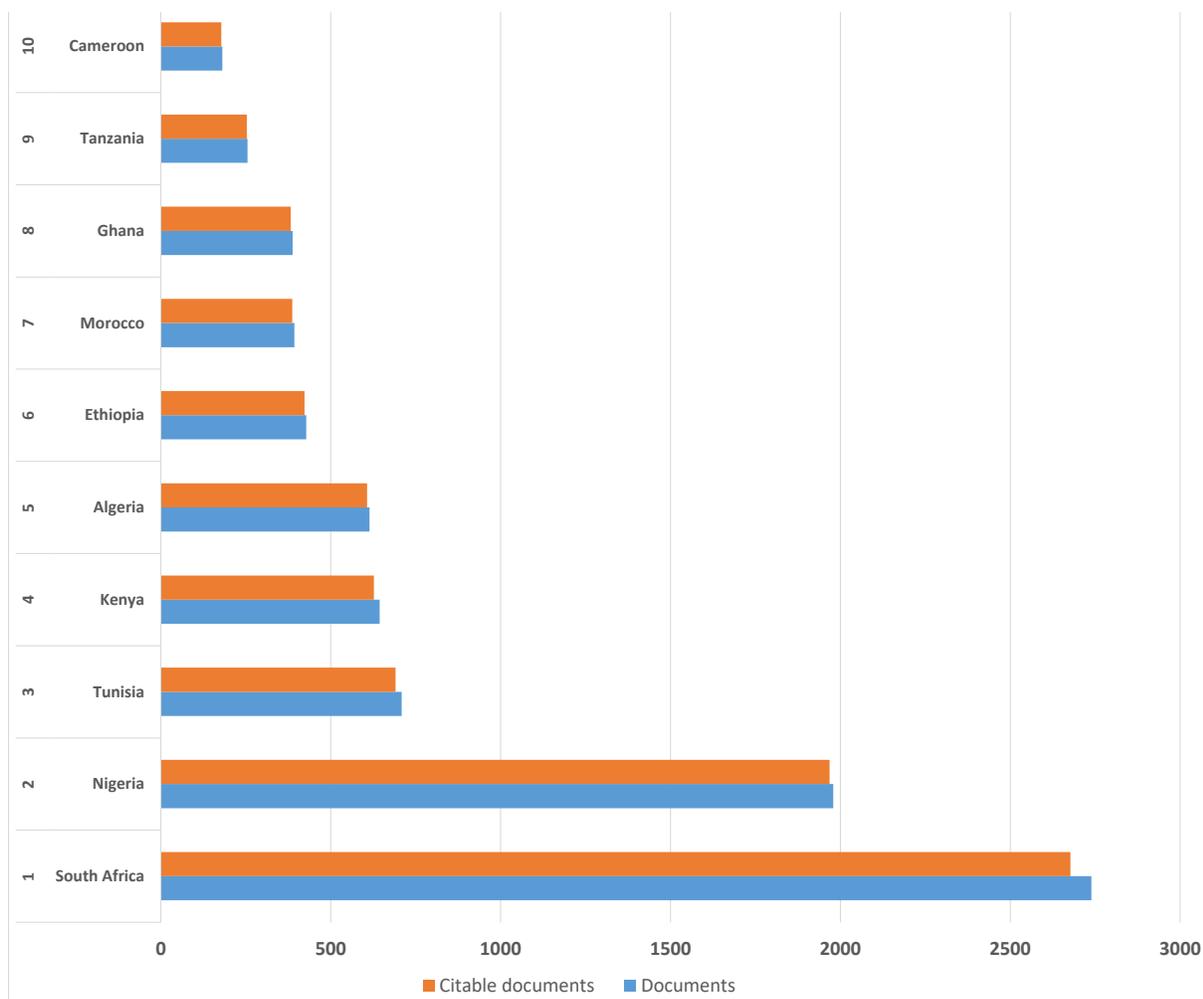


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Also, African research is not evenly spread” (SCImago Journal Rank, 2017; Nnadozie, 2017: p. 4). South Africa, Tunisia, Nigeria and Algeria dominate the output quota of research in Africa (SCImago Journal Rank, 2018). South Africa accounts for a substantial number of Africa’s publications. It accounted for around 46 percent of Sub-Saharan Africa’s publications in 2014 (SCImago Journal Rank, 2015). The top ten ranked countries in Africa in 2017 were South Africa, Tunisia, Nigeria, Algeria, Morocco, Kenya, Ethiopia, Ghana, Uganda and Tanzania (see Figure 2). While the lower five (Kenya, Ethiopia, Ghana, Uganda and Tanzania) tend to change in their annual ranking positions, the top five (South Africa, Tunisia, Nigeria, Algeria and Morocco) have been more consistent. This also reflects an imbalance in regional research outputs within Africa.





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Figure 3: Top 10 publication ranking in environmental sciences subjects between 1996-2017 (based on data from SCImago Journal Rank, 2019)

The country rankings presented in this article are based on data from *SCImago Journal and Country Rank*, which is a publicly available portal that includes the journals and country scientific indicators developed from the information contained in the *Scopus database*. The indicators from *SCImago Journal and Country Rank* was used to assess country rankings and compare country positions. There is therefore a stronger need to do more research in the continent, and land governance research provides opportunity for action because the land sector remains one of the sectors attracting strong (and genuine) global interest in the continent. Figures 3 and 4 shows the top 10 publication ranking in environmental sciences and urban studies subjects between 1996-2017 respectively.

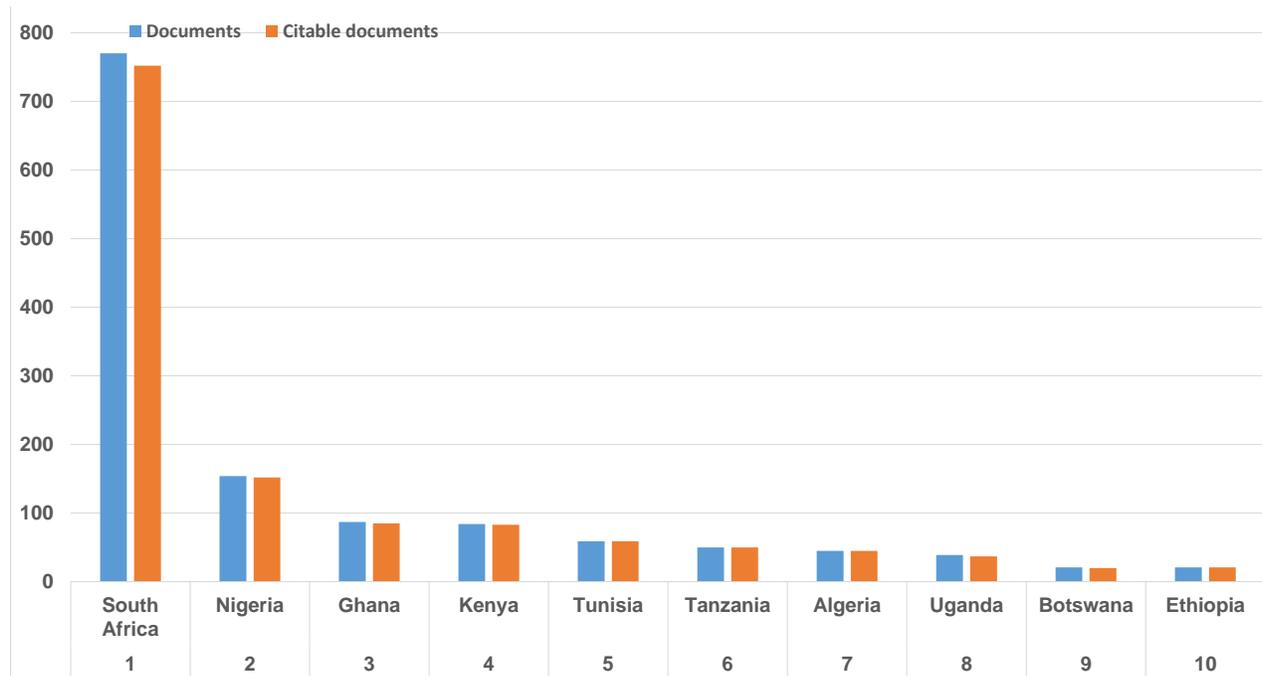


Figure 4: Top 10 publication ranking in urban studies subjects between 1996-2017 (based on data from SCImago Journal Rank, 2019)

### 3.1 African Union’s declaration on land issues and challenges: a review of progress made



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Several declarative commitments have been made by the African Union towards improved land governance in the continent (African Union, 2017). The question that arises is, how many of these commitments have anything to do with improving the research capacity on land governance in the continent. In this section of the article, a critical view of some of the key commitments on land governance is outlined (with focus on their research components).

- The African Union Declaration on Land Issues and Challenges in Africa: In the African Union Declaration on Land Issues and Challenges (AU Declaration on Land), the governments of African countries agreed to “take ownership of- and lead land reform processes by strengthening institutions for effective land governance and allocating adequate budgetary resources for policy development, implementation and tracking of progress” (AUC-ECA-AfDB Consortium, 2011; African Union, 2017: p.2). What exactly are the institutional capacity of these countries in relation to land governance? What are needed to be improved? What are needed to be abandoned? What sort of reforms are needed? What is the transferable knowledge emerging from reforms? Only transformative researches that are evidence based can answer these questions.
- African Union’s Agenda 2063 and United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): In making this commitment, the African Union cited land governance as critical to actualising goals related to quality of life and well-being, agriculture, environment, peace and security, and gender equality. This particular agenda called for full implementation of the African Union’s “Framework and Guidelines on Land Policy in Africa” (AUC-ECA-AfDB Consortium, 2010) at the national level and promote the “Guiding Principles on Large Scale Land Based Investments in Africa” (AUC-ECA-AfDB Consortium, 2014). This agenda calls for transformative research to understand the linkages the SDGs have with local land tenure systems in African communities.
- Malabo Declaration on Accelerated Agricultural Growth and Transformation: “The Malabo Declaration on Accelerated Agricultural Growth and Transformation for Shared Prosperity and Improved Livelihoods specifies land tenure as one of the commitment areas in agriculture, while recognizing that this is ‘not (completely) under the mandate of the Ministry of Agriculture’” (African Union, 2017: p.3). It cited good land policies and



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management as key interventions for achieving agricultural transformation with equitable access to land and secure land rights being critical to investment and sustainable land management. However, this calls for research in grasping the link between secure land rights to local investments.

Most of these commitments (and there are many others not presented in this article) demand for promoting or coordinating institutions. For instance, the ten-year implementation plan for Agenda 2063 specifically cites the Land Policy Initiative (now African Land Policy Centre) as an institution to promoting agricultural productivity and production. However, University based research centres can contribute by ensuring that appropriate researches are done and that trainings are carried out to link research with policy. They have a role to support the African Land Policy Centre in the aspects of research and training. As some research centres already exist at the university level, what will distinguish any new centres would be their conceptual and operational path.

## **4. IDEAS TOWARDS A NEW RESEARCH CENTRE CONCEPT**

The use of research centre concepts in driving knowledge advances in the land sector is not new. There is need to drive accelerate knowledge building (and use) in land governance through research centre concepts in Africa because research centres have potentials to lead to real improvements in knowledge creation for policy reforms, land governance structuring and general capacity improvement in the land sector. However, there is need to seek models that facilitate continuous engagement between knowledge generation and policy-making

### **4.1 What to bear in mind when creating transformative centres for land governance**

Land governance for its own sake will produce no benefit to the people of Africa. Instead, it will rather produce more bureaucracy in the delivery of development to people. Land governance without an understanding of the science of change can lead to unproductive decisions (and engagements). The status quo will result in no benefit to local communities unless land issues are discussed, researched, and implemented with the objective of transformation. That is why the transformation of land governance status quo is crucial in Africa. In order to create the expected



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change, change makers who want to embark in the creation of transformative centres for land governance should bear in mind the need to fill the following specific gaps existing in land governance education and capacity development in Africa:

- Politicians are not very knowledgeable about land matters. African politicians and policymakers learn on the job because of the dearth or lack of land components in political public policy administration institutions. The impact is that policy makers have limited capacity and incentive to learn from and utilise the scientific evidence generated by academics and knowledge professionals. This is apparent in African policymakers' weak grasp of technical issues in the governance of land. There is need to take land governance knowledge directly to politicians and policymakers to equip them with the knowledge they need to govern land and natural resources to make transformative change.
- Women, youths and refugees are vulnerable to land insecurities in Africa. Policymakers have limited capacity to use empirical evidence. Policymakers view land as an infinite resource, and deploy land as a political resource, thereby negating the positions of women, youths and refugees. Women, youths and vulnerable groups need to be empowered with the knowledge they need to secure land and property rights.
- Large-scale land investors lack an understanding of the implications of their activities in Africa. Households lose in land negotiations and suffer the long-term effects of badly negotiated land deals. The consequence of land sales or leases tend to impoverish and deprive local land owners of economic empowerment. Investors need to be capacitated with locally responsible practices that facilitate win-win situations. There is need to capacitate people on how to use (and appreciate) existing instruments aimed at safeguarding land rights in the continent (see AUC-ECA-AfDB Consortium, 2014).
- Policy makers have limited access to scientific research output. There is a gap between policy and evidence in land governance in Africa. As a result, academics are frustrated by their inability to inform land governance. Policymakers and knowledge producers need to engage in a way that facilitates the production of accessible, relevant and context specific knowledge



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Research centres that are not positioned to addressing most of these issues in their framework of activities (and approaches to operations) may not be taking realistically transformative path to contributing to improvements in the African land governance research (and capacity development) challenges. This should be followed by a theory of change that responds to the issues in Africa.

## 4.2 Adopting a theory of change responsive to African issues

There is need to identify societal problems, then use knowledge building to engender transformative changes that can cause land based impacts (in terms of living conditions) on women, youths, vulnerable groups and men (see Figure 5).

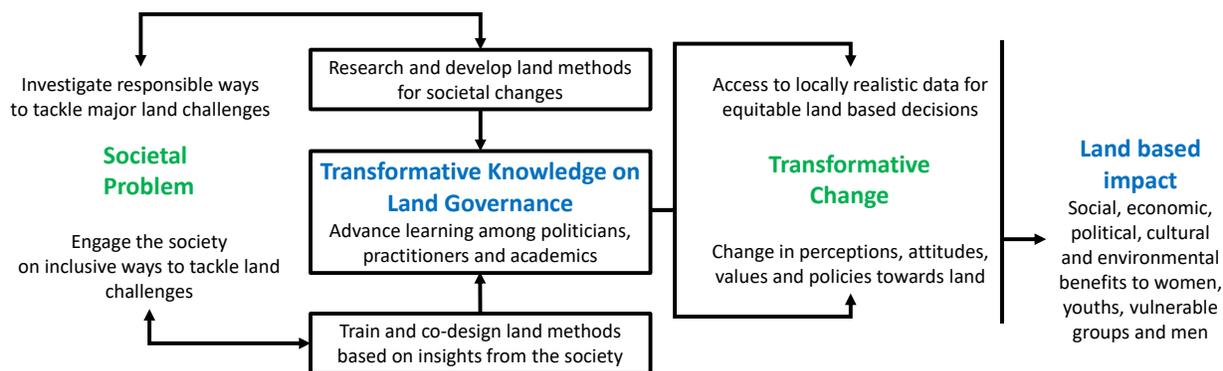


Figure 5: A theory of change which transformative research centres should adapt

## 4.3 Engaging in innovative services that are transformative

New research centres should focus on the following six areas of intervention.

- Conduct transformative land research for, in and on Africa: New research centres should directly engage and collaborate with other agencies to do user-oriented research on land (and land resources) in Africa. They should ascertain the ways of causing a land-based transformation to equitable societies in Africa. Their research objectives should focus on helping to craft more effective, durable and equitable solutions to the problems of land, in a context of cultural diversity and social transformation in Africa. Participatory and inclusive of various stakeholders.



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- Land governance/policy advisory: New research centres have to conduct policy advisory services on various aspects of the land challenges in Africa. The approach will be to target government (executive, parliamentary and judicial) agencies at various levels of operation in African countries.
- Land governance publications: New research centres should synthesise and share transformative knowledge from their research by bringing the findings to the global stakeholders through diversifying knowledge packaging and dissemination models.
- Land forum organisation and facilitation: New research centres have to organise and facilitate land events to foster, build and disseminate knowledge competences for interdisciplinary and cross-professional collaborations within institutions, governments and across Africa.
- (Post)Graduate teaching and short courses: New research centres have to engage in, and carry out demand-driven short courses for agencies interested to improve their knowledge on specific areas of land governance. The short courses should target politicians, government workers, members of civil society and nongovernmental organisations; and members of local communities.
- Facilitating the development (and expansion ) of African research networks: This strategy is necessary to help enhance internal collaborations among African researchers to improve knowledge building on local land issues within the continent of Africa. For instance, the *Network of Land Governance Researchers in Africa (NELGRA)*<sup>2</sup> which was formed in 2018 provides a platform for internal research collaborations in Africa. However, this is only possible if they are supported by emerging research centres.

Any new research centre can operate within the niche of demand-driven basis by mobilising a tailored “faculty” of land experts (from academia and development practice) in response to specific land challenges called upon to address by stakeholders or clients. This means that clients (or policymakers) can easily use evidence to inform their problem-solving and policymaking tasks.

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<sup>2</sup> In June 2018, a group of participants at NELGA workshop at the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology proposed to work as a network, under the name “Network of Land Governance Researchers in Africa (NELGRA)”.



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## 5. REFLECTIONS AND STEPS MOVING FORWARD

One of the important outcomes of this research is the development of a ready-for-implementation research centre concept note (and proposal) which can be operationalised in line with the ideas presented in this article.<sup>3</sup>

Although there is increasing research activities on land governance in African, there still substantial room for improvement. Despite all the progress being made in creating a stronger network on land governance in Africa, researchers (and academics) are still disconnected from policymakers in terms of the needs, and interpretation of research in ways that policymakers can relate. What this article has done is to provide a land governance centre concept that would work within the interface of research and capacity development that is inclusive in ways that connect land governance knowledge creators (such as academics and practitioners) with policymakers (as users or consumers). By way of reflections, all investors in research centre operations (e.g. governments, universities and individuals) can follow the concept presented in this paper noting that:

- The novel concept presented in this article embraces research and capacity development as a flexible package for the delivery of land governance learning activity.
- Advances in translating land governance research (and innovations) into land governance practice will lead to improved awareness and capacities of politicians to deepen their land governance knowledge with the hope that it will reflect in their policymaking.
- The opportunity to deliver improved capacity development in land governance is ongoing in Africa much more than ever before. This is because with the NELGA initiatives of the African Land Policy Centre, capacity development in land governance within Africa has never been greater. It presents opportunity for research centres to leverage on it to contribute to ongoing efforts.

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<sup>3</sup> Organisations or groups (including NGOs, universities and higher institutions) interested in setting up transformative research centres in land governance can contact the authors for guidance on the best ways to conceptualise a transformative research centre on land governance.



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This article is not, in any way, meant to suggest that the development of research centres on land governance would resolve Africa's research challenges. It is meant to contribute as one of the many measures needed for improving land governance in the continent. Its contributions would only be possible when backed up with preconditions such as:

- Creating (and strengthening existing) universities and graduate programs in land governance (and other traditional land related programmes) in the physical, humanities and social sciences.
- Build inter-Africa partnerships based on mutual benefits and North-South partnerships based on mutual respect.
- Ensuring capacity to link research to local needs (and realities).
- Support research-industry (including political sectors) linkages to ensure use of research outputs.
- Establishing robust research governance and support structures, and promoting effective leadership in research.

Land governance research cannot be done in isolation from other land research areas such as environment, water, forest, minerals, local community development (to mention a few). For it to grow into result-oriented activity, there is need for collaborative activities in understanding sector gaps, formulating ideas, writing their grants and working towards a common goal. That is why it is important to training and researching in Africa for Africans is necessary. That is why developing transformative centres for research (and training) in land governance is necessary in African countries.

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