



## **Institutional Transparency of Urban Land Management in Ethiopia: a Case Study in Sebeta, Gelan and Sendaf-Bake Towns of the Oromia Region**

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Received: 10 September 2024

Accepted: 10 March 2025

Published: 30 June 2025

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Article DOI:10.20372/ejed.v07i1.02

### **Abstract**

*The research investigates the transparency of urban land management in Ethiopia, focusing on the towns of Sebeta, Gelan, and Sendafa-Bake within the Oromia Region. To fulfill this objective, a convergent research design was adopted, framed within a mixed-methods research approach. Data was gathered through both qualitative and quantitative means from primary and secondary sources. Various techniques, including interview schedules, interviews, focus group discussions, and document analysis, were employed to gather information. The study utilized both probabilistic and non-probabilistic sampling methods to select participants. Statistical and contextual analysis techniques were applied to present and interpret the data. The results of the study reveal that the land management system in the examined area is deficient in a robust transparency framework. In addition, more than 60% of the respondents stated that the level of transparency in the official activities of land management offices was limited. According to the study's recommendations, regional and local governments should make sure that the land management system adheres to transparent, uniform, and unambiguous service delivery standards in order to offer citizen's fair, impartial, and nondiscriminatory services. This helps to ensure that an efficient and effective land and land-related services system is consolidated in the study area.*

**Keywords/Phrases:** Transparency, Land management, Land service delivery, Towns in Oromia Region

## **1 Introduction**

### **1.1 Background and Purpose**

Land in Sub-Saharan Africa is increasingly recognized as an important national policy issue (Adugna & Workalemahu, 2023 and Hafte & Pregala, 2021). Nevertheless, land administration in the area is hindered by a deficiency in transparency due to convoluted regulatory frameworks and intricate administrative procedures. Degu (2024, p.2) stated that "Urban land management practices and processes have been vulnerable to mismanagement and corruption due to the absence of good governance." Employees at land administration offices are susceptible to corruption. The works of Zevenbergen *et al.* (2024) also recognize that inefficiency in land administration is a prevalent, persistent, and serious issue that

is becoming increasingly acknowledged as a critical characteristic of the Region. Consequently, the ambiguity surrounding land policies and laws, inadequately managed urban land administration and development processes, along with the ensuing land disputes, have consistently been among the primary issues that underscore the necessity for transparent land management in the region. This highlights the imperative to promote good governance in land administration (Transparency International, 2021).

Similar to most Sub-Saharan African countries, the increase in the economic weight of urbanization in Ethiopia is reflected in the increased concentration of people in urban areas (Ministry of Urban Development, Housing, and Construction, 2014). As a result, cities and towns have alarmingly expanded into

neighboring rural areas. Studies conducted by Giorgis & Goitom (2024); Olira (2022); Bekele (2021); Adugna, & Workalemahu, (2023); Takele, Kwame & Melese (2014) and Alemie, Zevenbergen & Bennet (2015) stated that most of the urban centers in Ethiopia face numerous challenges in land management. In the country, urban land administration processes have been prone to unclear policy frameworks, corruption, and misappropriation due to the absence of transparent management (Fekadu, 2022). However, the Ethiopian government mentions the importance of applying the principles of transparency in urban land as stated below:

The prevalence of democratic management is a foundational institutional requisite for the development of an efficient, effective, equitable, and well-functioning land and land property market, the sustenance of a robust market economy, and for building a transparent and accountable land administration system (Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE), Urban Lands Lease Holding Proclamation No. 721, 2011, p. 1).

According to the FDRE-Ministry of Urban Development, Housing, and Construction (2014), urban land depends on the establishment of a modern and effective system that enables the achievement of development, growth, and open governance of urban areas. The land management policy and law at the federal and regional levels, as well as the urban land lease-holding proclamations and other regulations and directives, are the legal frameworks that impact land management in the country. Besides, the Constitution provides regional States the responsibility of land administration, and the large regions have all issued several frameworks in their jurisdiction (Royal Tropical Institute, 2016). Studies conducted by Hafte & Pregala, (2021); Olira (2022); Ashenafi (2015); Alemie (2015); Takele, Kwame & Melese (2014), and Alemie, Zevenbergen & Bennet (2015), however, specified that the system of land administration in the country in general and in the four large regions (Amhara, Oromia, in the then SNNP, and Tigray Regions) in particular have substantial structural shortcomings. According to these research, bribery, land grabbing, and other forms of corruption are among the many misconducts that surround the urban land administration system. In this regard, the

government has also stated that land management frameworks are top-down and inflexible, restricting what landholders may and cannot do. As a result, the land use system's flexibility—which is crucial for socioeconomic development—is reduced, which has negative effects on inclusive and transparent land use.

In the country, several researchers examined the land management system. Study reports mentioned in the above paragraph state that the theory and practice of the land administration system indicate theoretical and empirical gaps. In doing this, the study has attempted to fill the research gaps found in earlier research. Previous research studies have also sought to comprehend the land administration system from various viewpoints. The investigation carried out by Transparency International (2014) has underscored the widespread corruption within the country's land administration system, whereas Alemie's (2015) research emphasized the significance of cadaster in urban land management frameworks. Furthermore, Takele, Kwame & Melese (2014) noted in their study that methods to enhance effective management in urban land administration in the country are exemplified by a case study of Hawassa City. Olira (2022) evaluated the practices of urban land administration in Shashemene City, while Hafte (2021) examined the urban land governance of Mekelle City.

Nevertheless, the majority of current research focuses on urban land management in large urban areas, specifically Addis Ababa, Adama, Hawassa, Shashemene, Mekelle, and Bahir Dar. This implies that existing studies did not give adequate concern for the study of the institutional transparency of urban land management in the country. In this, empirical literature overlooked the institutional bottlenecks of transparency in urban land management in the study area. The issue of urban land management and the required institutional transparency thereof also needs further empirical analysis. In addition, indicators of institutional transparency need to be discussed to expose gaps in this regard. Furthermore, no empirical research has been done in the subject region to look at the transparency of urban land management. Given this, the current study set out to investigate the institutional transparency of the nation's land management system. This study

looked at how openly tiny, previously rapidly growing urban communities in Ethiopia's Oromia Region managed their urban land. In support of this, the researcher has conducted a personal observation in the study sites and explored that there are problems (which include lack of openness in land service delivery, inadequate answerability of officials, and weak information supply to the citizens) in the process of ensuring transparent land service delivery in the urban centers of the Zone. The research therefore examined the level of transparency within the urban land management system of Sebeta, Gelan, and Sendafa-Bake in the Oromia Region of Ethiopia. It sought to evaluate the decision-making process, the availability of official information, the public's oversight of official actions, and various other aspects of transparency in the land management systems of the towns under study.

## 1.2 Institutional Transparency in Land Management

One key element that public service providers guarantee to the public is transparency in official activities. It promotes public trust in both the caliber of services being rendered and the officials who carry out their official responsibilities. Properly maintained, transparency in the public sector enables citizens to have relevant, timely, and credible information about the decisions and actions that public agencies take concerning the services that are delivered to citizens (Amalia, 2023). Source

Institutional transparency signifies that the policies, laws, regulations, charters, codes, and rules governing land must be accessible to the public (Transparency International, 2021). Additionally, it encompasses the statutory instruments related to land, ensuring they are understandable, which includes promoting legal literacy (Erkkila, 2020). Moreover, institutional transparency in land management pertains to the organizational structures, levels of decision-making processes, and procedures. It is essential to provide informational leaflets, checklists, guides, and forms that outline the necessary steps, the time required to complete processes, and the means to access information regarding land, including appeal routes. Furthermore, the facilities and offices should be open to the public (Zimmermann, 2008).

Urbanization and use of land for various services imply an "increased need for well-designed land policies to ensure the security of land-holders rights, to facilitate land access, and to maintain equitable and transparent land distribution" (World Bank, 2012, p. 1). In this regard, the idea of transparency implies that government agencies must make judgments and take acts in an open manner in accordance with legal norms and regulations. It shows that citizens impacted by government choices and activities have unrestricted and open access to pertinent and accurate official information. This also indicates that sufficient information is supplied and that it is presented in formats and media that are easily comprehensible. Land management organizations must create innovative methods to document and preserve land information, which guarantees enhanced service delivery within a reasonable timeframe. Land allocation and dispute resolution procedures should be simple and uncomplicated. On top of these, an effective transparency system facilitates the interaction, cooperation, and synergy between citizens and government offices, which in turn increases public trust in the government and its services (Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, 2011). Therefore, transparency in the land management institutions is crucial for "sustainable development in terms of equitability, stakeholder participation, and benefits, and consistency in law and policy implementation" (Burns & Dalrymple, 2008, p. 2). Thus, it has been proven that the management of other public sectors cannot be separated from the management of transparent land administration.

However, due to a number of obstacles in their attempts to meet public demands, nations that are developing, like Ethiopia, have a poor track record of guaranteeing a genuine and efficient urban land administration system. Even though the majority of people in most of these nations rely on land for their fundamental livelihood, their land administration systems are susceptible to a variety of issues, from straightforward administrative bottlenecks to official corruption. This raises doubts about the countries' land administration rules and procedures' transparency. Both national and municipal governments are under pressure to address the collective and individual demands and interests of citizens due to administrative, economic, political, institutional, and

technical issues. However, current debates in the literature on public administration indicate that the application of transparent management principles in the formulation and implementation of public policies, particularly in urban land management, successfully resolves problems, ensures the effective delivery of land and land-related services, and satisfies the basic needs of the people in these countries. Consequently, the study has investigated the degree of transparency in urban land management within the context of theoretical frameworks of transparency.

## 2 Research Methods and Materials

### 2.1 Research Approach and Design

A thorough analysis of the institutional transparency in land management necessitates the use of both quantitative and qualitative methodologies (Burns & Dalrymple, 2008). In this context, the study employed both quantitative and qualitative research methods. Exploring the views of respondents and analyzing documents to describe the extent of transparency in the land management process required both approaches. Both objective examination of numerical data and interpretive comprehension of respondents' responses were carried out in order to accomplish the study's goals. The study utilized a convergent research design. In this framework, the researcher used a snapshot method to collect data at a particular point during the research process, and both quantitative and qualitative data were collected in a cross-sectional fashion. Additionally, both quantitative and qualitative data were analyzed and interpreted simultaneously.

### 2.2 Data Sources and Type

Both primary and secondary data sources were used in the study. Focus group participants, key informants, and sample households provided primary data. This primary data was further substantiated by reviewing unpublished documents and statistical information collected from various regional and local government offices. A variety of materials were reviewed in the process of using secondary sources, including published articles, research studies, earlier investigations, books, official reports from federal and regional offices, town administration documents, government policies, legal documents, publications

from the Central Statistical Agency, and other pertinent sources. Additionally, data that was both qualitative and quantitative was gathered and examined. While key informant interviews, focus groups, and document analysis were used to obtain qualitative data, interview schedules were used to collect quantitative data.

### 2.3 Selection of Respondents

Before the establishment of Sheger city in October 2022, the towns in the Oromia Region surrounding Addis Ababa included eight major town administrations (Gelan, Burayu, Sebeta, Sululta, Dukem, Lege-Tafo-lege Dadi, Sendafa-Bake and Holota). Currently, except Sendafa-Bake and Holota towns, the remaining six towns are included in the new establishment of Sheger City as the sub-cities of the Sheger City Administration. During the time this research is conducted, three towns namely Sebeta, Gelan, and Sendafa-Bake towns were selected using simple random sampling technique to ensure that adequate representation was ensured. In selecting the survey respondents, a systematic random sampling technique is used. It is employed to identify sample respondents from each randomly selected town. Sample respondents were selected using a sampling formula that is suggested by Krejcie & Morgan (1970, p. 610). The formula is stated as:

$$\text{Sampling Formula: } S = \frac{\chi^2 NP(1-P)}{D^2(N-1) + \chi^2 P(1-P)}$$

Where: S = required sample size;  $\chi^2$  = the table value of chi-square for 1 degree of freedom at 0.05 confidence level (1.96); N = the population size; P = the population proportion (assumed to be 0.50 as this would provide the maximum sample size); and d = the degree of accuracy expressed as a proportion (0.05).

This was used to determine the sample size, and 382 household respondents from the three towns were selected as a representative sample of the entire population. Nevertheless, 357 interview schedules were accurately recorded and examined by data collectors, while the remaining 29 were rejected because respondents' answers were not correctly filled out, and some of the questionnaires were incomplete or imprecise. As a result, 357 respondents provided quantitative data, yielding a response rate

of around 93.5%. Using SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences version 25), the quantitative data was edited, coded, classed, entered, and analyzed. The results were presented using frequency distribution, percentage, and descriptive statistics of the median. On the other hand, qualitative data was gathered from key informants. Six key informant interviews were conducted to collect data. From each town, two key informants were purposively selected based on their knowledge of the matter. Two key informant interviews were also made with experts working in regional, and federal Land Management and Development Offices. In addition, one FGD was conducted in each town. The FGD participants were drawn purposively from different segments of the population. Elders, government employees, merchants, and youth representatives were members of the FGDs. Text analysis of documents and content analysis of interviews were used to assess qualitative data. In terms of research ethics, the study has made an effort to uphold participant rights, informed consent, confidentiality, and anonymity.

### 3 Results

In the realm of urban land management, it is essential to focus on creating and reinforcing a transparent system, given that this sector is particularly vulnerable to corruption and various types of maladministration. Consequently, the subsequent section outlines the findings and discussions derived from data gathered from multiple sources concerning the degree of transparency in urban land service delivery within the towns of Sebeta, Gelan, and Sendafa-Bake in the Oromia Region, near Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

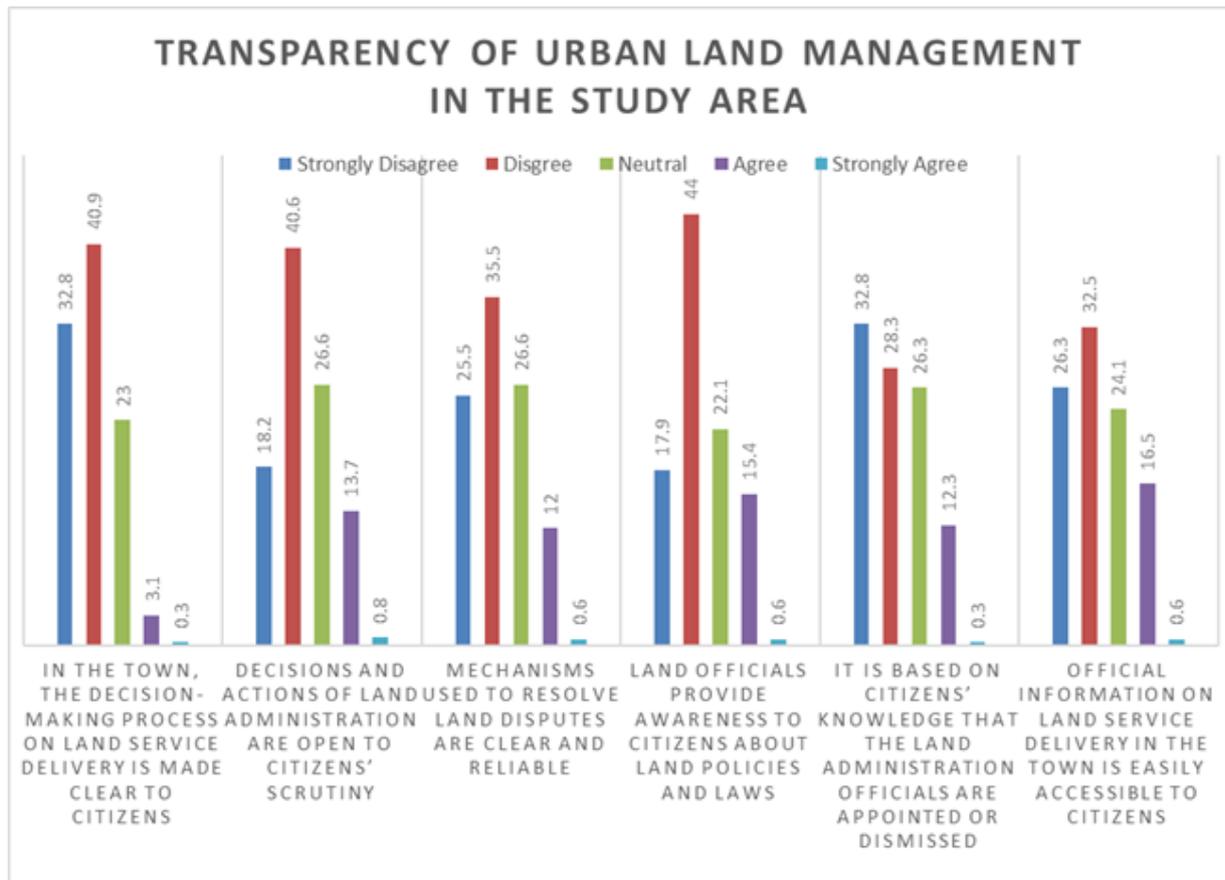
The graph below shows that the majority of respondents, 73.1% (40.9% disagree and 32.2% strongly disagree, respectively), believe that the decision-making process for land service delivery in the study towns was unclear to the public, while about 23% have a neutral opinion. However, only 14.5% of respondents thought that individuals could understand the decision-making process. In a similar vein, the majority of household heads who took part in the study (58.8%) stated that land administration decisions and actions were not subject to public scrutiny,

but approximately 14% of them had a complaint against the majority. The remaining 36.6% of respondents were undecided about the issue.

Although 12% of respondents agreed with the statement that the procedures utilized to settle land disputes in the research area were transparent and trustworthy, two-thirds of respondents disagreed. According to 61.9% of respondents (44% disagree and 17.89% strongly disagree), land administrators were not dedicated to being informed citizens of the land laws and regulations in the research area. Conversely, about 16% of respondents believed that authorities in charge of Urban Land Management and Development tried to educate the public about the institutional frameworks and policies established by local and regional governments.

Furthermore, over 61% of the respondents said that the public knew very little about how land administration officials were selected or fired, while roughly 26% of them had no view. The remaining 12% of interviewees said that the public knew how officials were nominated or fired. Furthermore, the claim that town residents had easy access to official information on land service delivery was rejected by over 58% of the participants. However, about 17% of them stated that locals had easy access to official information regarding land management in the research area. Of them, 24.1% had no opinion about the question.

The qualitative information obtained from respondents through key informant interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) revealed that the degree of transparent urban land services was restricted, which is consistent with the quantitative data. In this context, one of the key informants interviewed in August 2021 attested to the town's lack of transparency in its land management procedures. He stated that the town's citizens were not given enough information about the decisions and activities of the local administration. The key source said that people seldom receive timely, reliable, and correct information about urban land management. Similarly, a key informant from Gelan town expressed the opinions expressed by other key informants (conducted in August, 2021).



**Graph 1.** Transparency of Urban Land Management in Sebta, Gelan, and Sendafa-Bake towns of Oromia Region (Source: Field Survey, December, 2021)

As he indicated, it was challenging to assess how transparent the town’s land management system was. The informant claimed that certain officials were not cooperative enough to offer sufficient and trustworthy information regarding the land management and development process. Furthermore, the public was largely unaware of the process used to appoint and remove the head and vice head of the Land Management and Development Bureau. Furthermore, complex adjudication procedures were involved in the resolution of land and land-related disputes. He went on to say that service seekers have to make several trips to offices in order to obtain pertinent information.

Key informants from Sendafa-Bake and Gelan Towns reached the same conclusion as FGD participants in Sebta Town. Participants in the FGD stated that the town’s Land Management and Development Bureau’s decisions and actions lacked sufficient transparency. They contended that in order to obtain proper land information and services,

service seekers were expected to bribe information brokers who acted as a middleman between officials and service seekers. Official information, which was at the very least meant to be included for public knowledge, is manipulated by land brokers.

According to one of the primary informants: accurate and trustworthy information is essential for service seekers. Official information, however, is difficult to get and manipulated. "Middlemen" interact with some officials and use official data to their own benefit. Even though it is exhausting, service seekers must visit offices frequently to obtain information and services. In order to obtain reliable information and services quickly, service seekers occasionally have to engage with brokers. This hindered the transparency of land service delivery. According to a FGD participant in Sendafa-Bake Town in December 2021, the municipal land management office has failed to create an open system to address the interests of the locals.

Participants in the FGD also confirmed to the fact that municipal elected officials hardly ever examined the land management bureau's functions. Participants acknowledged, however, that attempts had recently been made to obtain land-related information on official boards in order to reach citizens. Participants acknowledged that in recent days, there were improvements made by the local governments to provide adequate and reliable information about land management to citizens. In a comparable direction, nearly every key informant interviewee at the Federal and Regional Governments acknowledged that the study towns' urban land management policies were conspicuously opaque.

#### 4 Discussion and Interpretation

In summary, the quantitative and qualitative study presented above makes it evident that the land management methods in the towns of Sebeta, Gelan, and Sendafa-Bake need to be improved further because they do not have a sufficient system of transparency. Official information about land-related decisions and actions was not widely available to the public. In such a scenario, the municipalities' land management operations assigned individuals limited tasks as though they had no involvement at all. In broader terms, land management practices need to integrate the constitutional as well as democratic rights of citizens enshrined in the institutional frameworks to check the activities and performances of the government service delivery system. Besides, the data collected from respondents revealed that citizens had limited access to the official decisions regarding land service delivery. This also contradicts the legal rights of citizens to have adequate information regarding public service delivery as stipulated in the FDRE Constitution Article 29. Furthermore, it indicates that in order to encourage officials to provide correct and timely information and services, citizens should have attended offices on a regular basis. Furthermore, the land administration system's extensive land brokering practices have restricted residents' ability to closely examine the choices and actions of local governments. This paved the way for malpractices and corruption in the service delivery system. In the view of respondents, the institutional transparency in the land service delivery process was limited. It is inferred from the empirical data that there has

been an insubstantial transparency system in the land management offices. This is manifested in the situation that citizens got low access to land information, decision-making activities were not clear to citizens' and citizens did not have adequate knowledge of how land administration officials were appointed or dismissed.

Quite a lot of studies have shown similar findings. According to Dinka, Grima & Armies, (2016, p. 29), "there is no transparency of decisions and action taken by urban land management and development officials in Shanbu town" in the Oromia Region. The report by Transparency International (2014, p. 6) concluded that the primary "driver of corruption in the country is the lack of transparency and access to information. Lack of transparency is seen to permeate almost all aspects of land administration in the country."

A recent study by Adugna and Workalemahu (2023) revealed that a lack of transparency poses significant challenges to the implementation of effective governance in urban land use planning within Ethiopia. In a similar vein, Degu (2024) identified transparency as a key factor influencing urban land governance. Furthermore, the empirical findings presented by Hafte and Pregala (2022) corroborate this notion. They discovered that the absence of accountability, insufficient transparency, minimal public engagement, widespread corruption, and breaches of the rule of law are critical factors affecting customer satisfaction levels in Mekelle City, located in the Tigray Region.

In a study conducted by Ashenafi, (2015), it is found that land management and development activities in Addis Ababa City have failed to give adequate concern for the values of a transparent land service delivery. Similarly, Mohammed Hussein, (2008) conducted a study in Bishoftu town and revealed that the lack of a transparent service delivery process has hampered citizens to have timely, accurate, and credible land-related information in the town. This is also attested in the MoUDHC publication that local governments have failed to ensure transparency in land service delivery (MoUDHC, 2014). More importantly, a study by Deininger, Hilhorst, and Songw (2014) found that the lack of a transparent service delivery method makes land management techniques

in the majority of developing nations vulnerable to corruption. Moreover, Misganaw (2019, p. 1) concluded that "the post-1991 urban land management of Ethiopia opens a loophole for corruption due to its contents lacking clarity and non-transparent implementations, which attract many in the line to exercise administrative malpractices such as partiality, favoritism, working with illegal brokers and the of course corruption".

The literature on public sector transparency clearly indicates that land and land service delivery should meet the requirements set in urban land policies, and laws. The information about land and land related services should easily be accessible and be publicly available. In addition, the decision-making processes and procedures applicable the process of service delivery need to specify the steps, and time required to complete land service delivery and ensure that the means to access information is easily accessible to citizens.

In general, the aspects of transparency of land management considered in the study indicates that there was low level of transparency of the decision-making process on land service delivery. Citizens had limited access to land and land related official information and their level involvement in ensuring transparency in the land management system was also inadequate. The result from the three towns showed consistency. The researcher claimed that there was no major differences of results among the three towns considered in the study. According to the researcher, it is crucial to provide land services in a transparent manner so that citizens can understand the decision-making process. Decisions made by the Land Management Office are required to be open to citizens' scrutiny. This helps to maintain the integrity of the service delivery system. It also contributes to the viability and credibility of municipal land management processes in the eyes of citizens. Additionally, openness guarantees that individuals have easy access to information and that the procedures used to resolve land disputes are dependable and transparent. The validity of the land service delivery system is greatly enhanced by this. From a management standpoint, ineffective service delivery, corruption, poor administration, citizen discontent, and other types of government bottlenecks are made worse by opaque land

management methods. As a result, public legitimacy declines and the study area's municipal land management methods fall into the category of inadequate management systems. However, it is a well-known truth that providing land services necessitates that processes for allocating land and resolving disputes adhere to the due process outlined in government legislation. Therefore, maintaining transparency makes institutions and their service delivery process accessible to all pertinent parties and permits the free flow of official information that guarantees citizens exercise their fundamental rights.

## 5 Conclusions

Access to urban land is a crucial requirement for ensuring sufficient housing for everyone and fostering the growth of sustainable human settlements that impact urban regions. Nevertheless, the management of urban land continues to be a highly intricate and controversial matter in Ethiopia, encompassing various processes, elements, and stakeholders. The inability to implement suitable land management practices across all tiers of government is a significant source of academic concern. In this context, the study has evaluated the transparency of urban land management in Ethiopia, concentrating on the cases of Sebeta, Gelan, and Sendafa Bake in the Oromia Region. As a result, the study found that there is insufficient transparency in the land management procedures used in the study cities. Official information on decisions and actions taken by Land Management and Development offices was not widely available to the public. Additionally, rampant land corruption and brokerages hampered the extent to which official functions were carried out in a transparent manner. Additionally, there was insufficient institutionalization of citizens' participation in examining the choices and actions of municipal land management and development initiatives.

### Implications of the study

The study has examined a topic that is poorly investigated in the Ethiopian context. The institutional transparency of urban land management in the region and nation with the highest rate of urbanization has been the subject of a few different types of research. Therefore, more scholarly research on the topic is necessary due to the inherent deficiency in

the literature. Furthermore, the study has only examined urban land management from the standpoint of institutional transparency. Other facets of land management and development operations were not discussed. However, researching rural land policy and practices in conjunction with urban land management is as essential.

### Recommendations of the Study

Based on the findings discussed in the above sections, the study has suggested the following recommendations.

- The study found that the decision-making process on land service delivery is not from citizen to citizen. Hence, the decision by municipality as well as regional urban land management offices should be made transparently and clearly to stakeholders.
- It is also recommended that the decisions and actions of land administration offices need to be open to citizens' scrutiny so as they can act as whistleblower and participate in the information board as members. This helps to combat malpractices and corruption in the sector.
- The investigation discovered that the procedures for settling land disputes are unclear and untrustworthy. As a result, concerned government organizations should put forth great effort to guarantee that land dispute resolution procedures are trustworthy and accessible to the general public.
- Municipal administrations should be committed to properly aware citizens of policies and laws that govern urban land administration.
- It is also important for both the government and service takers that land and land-related information are easily accessible and citizens have the right to have information regarding the appointment and dismissal of land administrators through their participation in the governance process of local governments.

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