

## 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. The study, based on the findings, recommends that governments at regional and local levels need to ensure that the land management system follows open, consistent, and clear service provision standards to provide impartial, objective, and non-discriminatory services to citizens. 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.” People who work in the land administration offices are exposed to the temptation of 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). This has resulted in an alarming expansion of cities

and towns into the boundaries of adjacent 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).

Furthermore, the FDRE-Ministry of Urban Development, Housing, and Construction (2014) asserts that urban land relies on the creation of a contemporary and efficient system, which facilitates the attainment of development, growth, and transparent governance of urban areas. In the nation, the legal structures influencing land management encompass the land management policy and legislation at both federal and regional tiers, including the urban land lease-holding proclamations along with various regulations and directives. 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. These studies found that the urban land administration system is bounded by various malpractices such as bribing,

land grabbing, and other types of corruption. In this context, the government has also declared that land administration frameworks regulate what landholders can and cannot do excessively, making them top-down and rigid. As a result, flexibility in the land use system, which is desperately needed for socio-economic development, is eliminated with all the adverse implications for transparent and inclusive 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.

However, existing research works are limited to the study of urban land management in major urban centers particularly in 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. On top of this, there are no empirical studies conducted to examine the transparency of urban land management in the study area. In light of this, the current study aimed

to examine the institutional transparency of the land management system in the country. This study examined the transparency of urban land management of small hitherto highly expanding urban centers found in the Oromia Region of Ethiopia. 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

Transparency in official duties is an important value that public service providers ensure to the citizenry. It helps citizens to have confidence both in officials who perform their official duties and the quality of services being provided. 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 context, the concept of transparency connotes that decisions and actions made by government organs need to be conducted in an open decision-making process based on legitimate rules and regulations. It indicates that pertinent and accurate official information is unreservedly and openly available to citizens affected by government decisions and actions. 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. The processes for land allocation and conflict resolution ought to be straightforward 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). Transparency in the land administration institutions is thus essential for "sustainable development in terms of equitability, stakeholder participation, and benefits, and consistency in law and policy implementation" (Burns & Dalrymple, 2008, p. 2). It is thus, affirmed that transparent management in the land administration cannot be treated separately from the management of other public sectors.

However, developing countries including Ethiopia do not have a good record in ensuring a legitimate and effective urban land administration system as they face various challenges in their effort to address the public demands. In most of these countries, although the land is a basic means of survival for the majority of the people, land administration processes in these countries are vulnerable to multifaceted problems that range from simple administrative bottlenecks to state corruption. This in turn makes the transparency of the policies and practices of land administration in the countries questionable. Admin-

istrative, economic, political, institutional, and technological challenges put pressure on governments at both national and local levels to respond to the collective and individual needs and interests of citizens. Nonetheless, recent discussions within the public administration literature suggest that the implementation of transparent management principles during the public policy-making and execution processes, especially in urban land management, effectively resolves issues, guarantees the efficient provision of land and land-related services, and meets the fundamental needs of the populace in these nations. 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. In achieving the objectives of the study, both objective analysis of numerical data and interpretive understanding of the responses from respondents were conducted. The study utilized a convergent research design. In this framework, both quantitative and qualitative data were gathered in a cross-sectional format, with the researcher employing a snapshot method to collect data at a single moment during the research process. Furthermore, the analysis and interpretation of both quantitative and qualitative data were performed concurrently.

### 2.2 Data Sources and Type

The research utilized both primary and secondary data sources. Primary data was obtained from sample households, key informants, and participants in focus groups. This primary data was further substantiated by reviewing unpublished documents and statistical information collected from various regional and local government offices. In the process of employing secondary sources, a range of

materials was examined, including published articles, research studies, previous investigations, books, official reports from both federal and regional offices, documents from town administrations, government policies, legal documents, publications from the Central Statistical Agency, and other relevant sources. Furthermore, both qualitative and quantitative data were collected and analyzed. Quantitative data were gathered using interview schedules, while qualitative data were sourced through key informant interviews, focus group discussions, and document analysis.

### 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).

Based on this, sample size determination was conducted and a sample size of 382 household respondents was taken from the three towns as a representative sample of the total population. However, 357 interview schedules were properly recorded and analyzed by data collectors while the remaining 29 of

them were discarded due to errors made in filling in the answers of respondents appropriately, and some of the questionnaires lacked completeness and precision. Hence, quantitative data was collected from 357 respondents making the response rate around 93.5%. The quantitative data was edited; coded, classified, entered, and analyzed using SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences version 25), and the analysis was made to present the findings 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. Qualitative data was analyzed using content analysis of interviews and text analysis of documents. Regarding ethical issues of the research, the study has tried to respect the rights of participants and maintained 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.

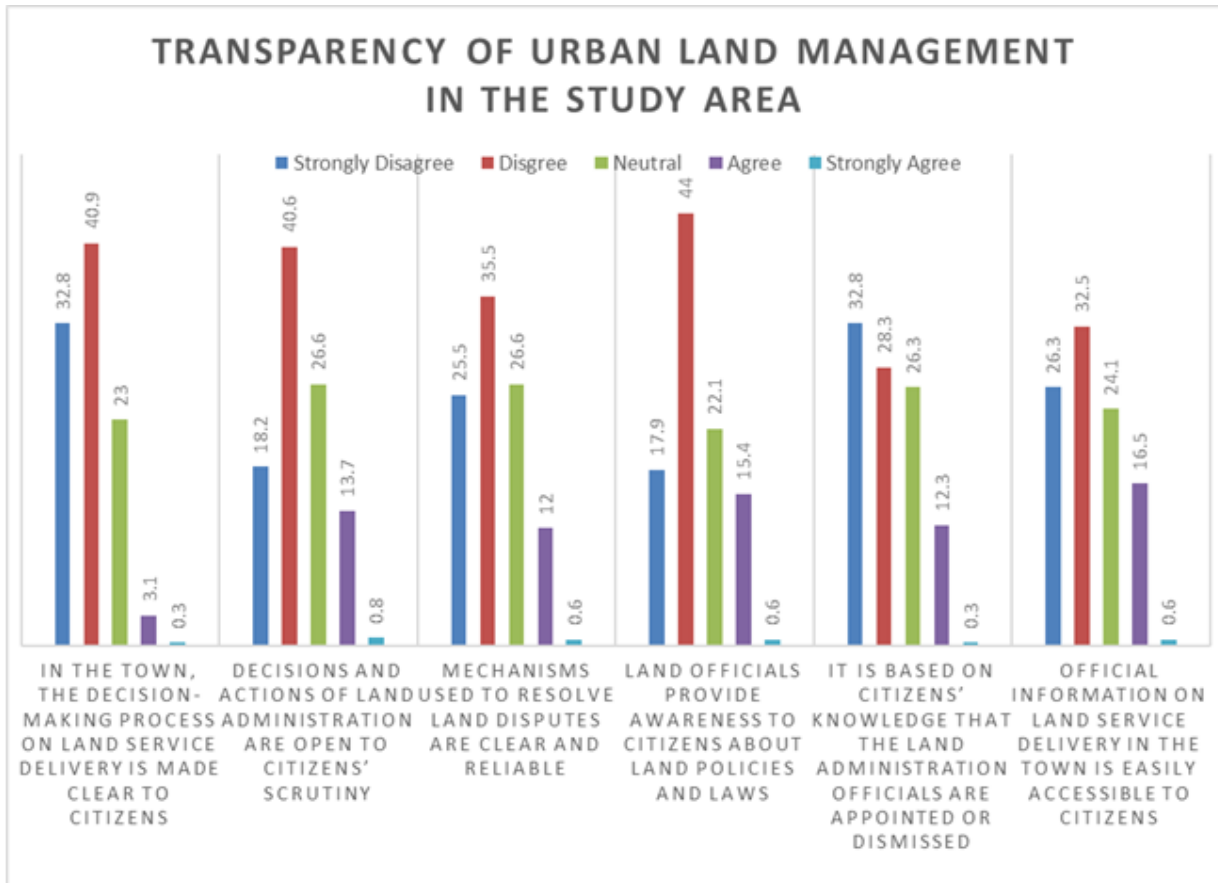
The following graph indicates that an overwhelming of the respondents 73.1% (40.9% and 32.2% disagree and strongly disagree respectively) have an opinion that the decision-making process on land service delivery in the study towns was not clear to citizens while around 23% of them held a neutral opinion. On the other hand, very few respondents (14.5%) agreed that the process of decision-making

was clear to citizens. Similarly, the majority (58.8%) of household heads who participated in the survey declared that decisions and actions of land administration were not open to citizens' scrutiny while around 14% of them had a claim against the majority. The remaining 36.6% of the respondents had a neutral opinion on the matter.

The opinion of two-thirds of the respondents showed that they disagreed with the claim that mechanisms used to resolve land disputes in the study area were clear and reliable whereas 12% agreed with the claim. In the views of 61.9% (44% disagree and 17.89% strongly disagree) of the respondents, land administrators were not committed to being aware citizens of the land policies and laws in the study area. On the contrary, around 16% of respondents held the view that Urban Land Management and Development officials worked to let citizens understand the policies and other institutional frameworks put in place by the regional and local governments.

On top of these, more than 61% of the respondents claimed that citizens had little information on the manner land administration officials were appointed or dismissed while around 26% of them had a neutral opinion about the issue. The remaining 12% of participants stated that citizens had information on the manner officials were appointed or dismissed. Besides, more than 58% of the participants disagreed with the assertion that official information on land service delivery was easily accessible to citizens in the towns. However, around 17% of them claimed that official information about land management in the study area was easily accessible to the residents. The remaining 24.1% of them were neutral on the subject of inquiry.

Similar to the quantitative data, the qualitative information gathered from respondents through key informant interviews, and FGDs showed that the extent of providing transparent urban land services was limited. In this milieu, one of the key informant interviewees (conducted in August 2021) confirmed that there was low transparency in the land management practices of the town. He mentioned that decisions and actions made by municipal administration were not adequately transparent to the residents of the town. Additionally, the key informant stated that citizens rarely get timely, accurate, and credible information regarding urban land management.



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

In the same manner, a key informant from Gelan town shared the views raised by other key informants (conducted in August, 2021). As he mentioned, it was difficult to judge the strength of transparency in the land management system of the town. According to the informant, some of the officials were not cooperative enough to provide adequate and reliable information about the process of land management and development. Besides, the public had little knowledge about how appointments and dismissals of the Land Management and Development Bureau head and vice head were made. Moreover, the process of resolving land and land-related conflicts faced intricate adjudication processes. He further pointed out that to get appropriate information, service seekers were required to visit offices repeatedly.

FGD participants in Sebeta town had arrived at the same conclusion as the key informants in Sendafa-Bake and Gelan Towns. FGD participants mentioned that decisions and actions taken by the Land Management and Development Bureau of the town were

not adequately transparent. They argued, there were information brokers between service seekers and officials, and service seekers were expected to bribe brokers to get accurate land information and services. Land brokers manipulate official information, which was at least supposed to be on board for public awareness. In the words of one of the key informants;

Service seekers need accurate and reliable information. However, official information is manipulated and is not easily accessed. ‘Middlemen’ deal with some of the officials and manipulate official information for their advantage. Service seekers need to visit offices frequently to get information and services although it is tiresome. There are times when service seekers are forced to deal with brokers to get accurate information and services as a shortcut. This made the transparency of land service delivery handicapped. The municipal land management office has failed to establish a transparent system to address residents’ interests (FGD Participant in Sendafa-Bake Town, December 2021).

FGD participants also confirmed that elected representatives of the people at the municipal level rarely scrutinized the activities of the land management bureau. However, participants also admitted that there were efforts in recent times to avail land-related information on official boards 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. Similarly, almost all key informant interviewees at Federal and Regional Governments admitted that there were visible deficiencies in the transparency of urban land management practices in the study towns.

#### 4 Discussions

In summing up, it is clear from the above quantitative and qualitative analysis that land management practices in Sebeta, Gelan, and Sendafa-Bake towns require further improvement as they lack an adequate system of transparency. Citizens had limited access to official information about decisions and actions regarding land. In this context, the roles of citizens were given meager roles by the municipals' land management activities as if they did not have a stake 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. Additionally, it is found that citizens should have visited offices repeatedly and sometimes were required to incentivize officials to get accurate and timely information and services. On top of this, widespread land brokering activities in the land administration system had limited citizens' roles in scrutinizing the decisions and actions of municipal administrations. 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 to the point, a study conducted by Deininger, Hilhorst & Songw (2014) has confirmed that the land management practices in most developing countries are susceptible to corruption as the process lacks



a transparent service delivery process. 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. The researcher argues that transparent land service delivery is paramount in ensuring that the decision-making process on land service delivery is made clear to citizens. 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. Besides, transparency ensures that citizens can easily access information, and the mechanisms used to solve land disputes will be clear and reliable. This significantly increases the legitimacy of the land service delivery system. In considering the management perspective, lack of transparency in land management practices exacerbates service provision inefficiency, corruption, maladministration, citizens' dissatisfaction, and other forms of government bottlenecks. This in turn

deteriorates public legitimacy and puts municipal land management practices of the study area in the realm of weak management systems. On the other hand, it is an acknowledged fact that land service delivery requires that procedures for land allocation and dispute resolution follow the due process defined by government law. Hence, ensuring transparency allows the free flow of official information that ensures citizens exercise their basic rights and makes institutions and their service delivery process open to any relevant entities.

## 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. Accordingly, the study identified that the practices of land management in the study towns lack an adequate system of transparency. Citizens had limited access to official information regarding decisions and actions made by Land Management and Development offices. In addition, the extent to which official activities were made in a transparent process was limited due to widespread land corruption and brokerages. Citizens' engagement in scrutinizing the decisions and actions of municipal land management and development activities was also inadequately institutionalized.

### Implications of the study

The study has examined a topic that is poorly investigated in the Ethiopian context. A few types of research have examined the institutional transparency of urban land management in the area where there is the highest rate of urbanization is exhibited both in the region and in the country. Hence, such an intrinsic deficit in the literature on the subject of the study calls for further academic research on



the topic. In addition, the study has analyzed the nature of urban land management exclusively from an institutional transparency perspective. It did not touch upon other aspects of land management and development activities. However, it is also necessary to study urban land management with rural land policies and practices.

### Recommendations

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 study found that the mechanisms used to resolve land disputes are not clear and reliable. Therefore, concerned government agencies should work diligently to ensure that land dispute settlement mechanisms are reliable and patent to citizens.
- 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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