

Land Administration and Ethics

Land administration “registering who has which rights over a defined piece of land” is an important branch of the geomatics discipline and in my view should be part of any geomatics curriculum taught at universities. However, I believe that education should not be limited to concepts and practices alone, but should also cover ethics. Why?

Basically, the aim of land administration (LA) is twofold: 1) tax collection, and 2) primary protection of citizens against expulsion by others, and the ‘others’ attempting to expel citizens from their land often take the shape of government authorities. It is with good reason that most countries’ constitutions contain clauses stating that every national citizen of that country is entitled to acquire and own real estate, and that the property shall not be forcibly acquired by the state except in return for prompt compensation, and that citizens have a right of access to court if those rights should be violated. Although LA is primarily intended to shield the interests of rightful claimants, it is increasingly being seen as a vehicle of land policy, a planning aid and a tool to support economic growth. Indeed, LA has the ability to support good governance, including sustainable governance.

Should the reverse also be true? In other words, should LA organisations and hence cadastres play a legitimate role in supporting good governance? Today’s sensing technologies enable vast amounts of data to be captured for any piece of land, covering a wide range of phenomena including any buildings or other constructions on it. Meanwhile, information technology enables the dissemination and use of the data in a split second and can relate the information captured to those who have settled rights over the land. So should cadastres register all the data which can be derived from today’s sensors and related to pieces of land on which uniform rights have been settled – this all motivated by the laudable mission of supporting good governance? And what do we mean by good governance? The World Bank states: “Good governance is epitomised by predictable, open and enlightened policymaking; a bureaucracy imbued with a *professional ethos*; an executive arm of government accountable for its actions; and a *strong civil society* participating in public affairs; and all behaving under the rule of law.” I added my own emphasis to the words in the previous excerpt, and would like to highlight them once more: professional ethos, strong civil society...

What can be used for *good* can also be used for *bad*. We are living in a world which is becoming increasingly vulnerable and insecure. Nowadays, the threats are not so much coming from beyond our own borders, as was the case during the Cold War, but rather from within them. History shows that in times of turmoil, citizens’ rights are ruthlessly trampled underfoot by anxious authorities while professional ethos rapidly fades away and a strong civil society becomes a sham. We should prepare our younger generations for declining sovereignty and teach them to stand firmly in their ethos-soled surveyor boots.