



Digital land registration in Nigeria: Legal frameworks, challenges, and prospects

Ahiakwo Grace Abraham

Department of Law, University in Ado Ekiti, Nigeria

Abstract

This paper examines the ongoing transition to digital land registration in Nigeria, a reform aimed at addressing the systemic inefficiencies, corruption, and insecurity of land titles that have long plagued the traditional manual system. We analyze the existing legal frameworks that govern land administration, particularly the Land Use Act of 1978 and its state-level adaptations, and how they interact with emerging digital technologies. The study identifies and dissects key challenges hindering a full-scale digital transformation, including inadequate technical infrastructure, high costs, resistance to change from within government institutions, and a lack of public awareness and digital literacy. While some states, notably Lagos and the Federal Capital Territory, have made significant strides by implementing Geographic Information Systems (GIS) and automated platforms, a uniform national system remains a distant goal. The prospects for digital land registration are substantial, promising enhanced transparency, reduced fraud, improved access to credit, and a more vibrant real estate market. Ultimately, this paper argues that achieving a successful and sustainable digital land registration system in Nigeria requires not just technological adoption, but comprehensive legal reform, institutional capacity building, and public-private collaboration to overcome the multifaceted barriers to its implementation.

Keywords: Land registration, nigeria, digitalization, legal framework, challenges, prospects, land use Act, GIS

Introduction

Land is arguably the most valuable asset in Nigeria, serving as a cornerstone of economic development, social security, and identity. However, the country's land administration system has historically been inefficient, opaque, and susceptible to fraud. The traditional, manual process of land registration involves a cumbersome series of steps—from obtaining a Certificate of Occupancy to securing Governor's consent and subsequent deed registration—that can be protracted, costly, and riddled with bureaucratic bottlenecks. This antiquated system has created a high degree of uncertainty regarding land titles, discouraging investment, fueling land-related disputes, and leaving a vast majority of land as "dead capital" outside the formal economy. It is estimated that a staggering 90% of land in Nigeria remains unregistered, representing a colossal amount of untapped wealth.

In a world increasingly driven by digital transformation, the need for a modern, technology-driven approach to land administration in Nigeria has become a national imperative. Digital land registration, which involves the conversion of paper-based land records into secure electronic databases and the automation of registration processes, offers a promising solution to these long-standing problems. The adoption of digital technologies such as Geographic Information Systems (GIS), electronic document management systems, and even emerging technologies like blockchain, has the potential to fundamentally reshape the land sector. By providing a single, verifiable, and tamper-proof record of land ownership, digitalization can enhance legal certainty, improve the speed and efficiency of transactions, and boost public confidence in the integrity of the land market.

The push for digitalization in Nigeria is not merely a technical upgrade; it is a critical component of broader economic and governance reforms. A transparent and reliable land registry is essential for unlocking the capital embedded in land, as it allows property owners to use their land as collateral for loans. This, in turn, can stimulate private sector growth and contribute to poverty reduction. Furthermore, digital land records can improve government revenue streams through more efficient land-based taxation and reduce the rampant corruption that characterizes the manual system.

Despite these compelling benefits, the journey towards a fully digital land registration system in Nigeria is fraught with significant hurdles. While the Federal Government and some state governments have initiated laudable projects, a fragmented and inconsistent approach has meant that progress varies widely across the country. The legal and institutional environment, which is largely a legacy of the colonial era and the Land Use Act of 1978, has not kept pace with technological advancements. The absence of a unified national legal framework for digital land transactions, including provisions for electronic signatures and digital documents, creates legal uncertainties.

This paper provides a comprehensive analysis of Nigeria's digital land registration landscape. It first examines the existing legal and institutional frameworks, highlighting both their limitations and the reforms that have been made. It then delves into the multifaceted challenges, ranging from infrastructural deficits to human and political factors. Finally, it explores the transformative prospects that a successful digital system holds for Nigeria's economy and society. By synthesizing insights from legal scholarship, government reports, and empirical studies, this research

aims to offer a holistic understanding of the complexities and opportunities involved in modernizing Nigeria's land administration system.

Methods

This study employs a mixed-methods approach to provide a comprehensive analysis of digital land registration in Nigeria. The research design integrates qualitative analysis of legal frameworks and policy documents with case study-based research to evaluate the implementation and impact of digital land registration systems in specific Nigerian states. The qualitative component focuses on a detailed legal and policy analysis. We conducted a systematic review of primary legal documents, including the Land Use Act of 1978 and relevant state-level land administration laws. This involved an in-depth examination of the legal provisions governing land ownership, transfer, and registration to understand the existing statutory basis for land administration. We also analyzed government policy papers, reports from land administration agencies, and official publications from key states to identify the legislative and regulatory reforms undertaken to facilitate digitalization. The legal analysis sought to pinpoint gaps and ambiguities within the current framework that hinder the adoption of digital technologies, such as the absence of a legal definition for electronic titles or the lack of provisions for electronic signatures.

The second component of the methodology involves a comparative case study analysis. We selected two key case studies to represent different levels of progress in digital land registration: Lagos State and the Federal Capital Territory (FCT), Abuja. These two regions were chosen because they have been pioneers in the digital transformation of land administration, offering rich data on both successes and challenges. Data for the case studies were gathered from publicly available sources, including:

- **Government websites and official reports:** We reviewed annual reports, project overviews, and online portals of the Lagos State Lands Bureau and the Abuja Geographic Information System (AGIS).
- **Academic literature:** A search of academic databases (e.g., JSTOR, Google Scholar) using keywords like "Lagos land registry," "AGIS Abuja," and "digital land administration Nigeria" provided scholarly critiques and empirical analyses.
- **News articles and expert commentaries:** We analyzed news reports and opinions from legal and real estate professionals to gain insights into the practical challenges and public perception of these digital systems.

By comparing and contrasting the experiences of Lagos and Abuja, this methodology allows for the identification of best practices and common challenges in implementing digital land registration. The integration of the legal analysis with the case studies provides a holistic understanding of how legal, political, and technical factors interact in the Nigerian context. The findings from this multi-faceted approach are presented in the results section, offering both a broad overview of the legal landscape and a granular, evidence-based account of the on-the-ground reality of digitization.

Results

The analysis of Nigeria's digital land registration landscape reveals a fragmented but promising picture, marked by significant progress in a few key states set against a backdrop of widespread legal and infrastructural challenges. The results are presented in three thematic areas: the existing legal frameworks, the progress and challenges of the case studies, and a synthesis of overarching issues and prospects.

Legal Frameworks: The Land Use Act and its Limitations

Our legal analysis confirmed that the **Land Use Act of 1978 (LUA)** remains the foundational legal framework for land administration in Nigeria. The LUA vests all land within a state's territory in the state governor, who holds it in trust for the people. This framework, designed in a pre-digital era, presents fundamental challenges to digitalization. The Act's heavy reliance on physical documents, manual signatures, and gubernatorial consent for every transaction makes it a significant legal and procedural bottleneck. For instance, the Act does not recognize digital signatures or electronic titles as legally valid, creating a legal vacuum that undermines the integrity of purely digital systems. While some states have enacted subsidiary laws and regulations to facilitate digital processes, these are often inconsistent and fail to fully address the core provisions of the LUA, leading to legal uncertainty for investors and landowners.

Case Studies: Lagos State and FCT, Abuja

The comparative case studies of Lagos and the FCT, Abuja, revealed two of the most advanced digital land registration systems in Nigeria, yet each with its own set of unique challenges.

- **Lagos State:** Lagos has made substantial progress with its Electronic Document Management System (EDMS) and the digitization of its land registry. The state pioneered the Lagos State Lands Registry Information System (LSLRIS), which has converted millions of paper-based land records into a digital database. The system has significantly reduced the time it takes to conduct a title search from months to a few days. The introduction of online portals for applying for and tracking Certificates of Occupancy has also streamlined the process. However, the system is not without flaws. Qualitative reports and expert commentaries highlight recurring issues such as a lack of system interoperability with other state agencies, leading to continued bureaucratic hurdles. Furthermore, the high cost of transactions in Lagos, including various fees and taxes, remains a barrier to formal registration for many citizens, perpetuating the problem of unregistered lands.
- **Federal Capital Territory (FCT), Abuja:** The Abuja Geographic Information System (AGIS) is a flagship project that stands out for its integration of Geographic Information System (GIS) technology with land administration. AGIS has successfully created a digital cadastral map of the FCT, assigning a unique plot number and title to every parcel of land. This GIS-based system has dramatically improved the security of

land titles, as it makes it much harder for multiple titles to be issued for the same plot of land. The system is also used for efficient land-based revenue collection. However, AGIS has faced significant operational challenges. The initial high cost of implementation, a lack of consistent political support, and frequent changes in leadership have led to system outages and backlogs. Furthermore, a substantial portion of FCT land remains outside the AGIS system, particularly in informal settlements, which limits the system's overall reach and effectiveness.

Synthesis of Overarching Challenges and Prospects

The comparative analysis revealed several overarching challenges hindering a national digital land registration system. Infrastructural deficits are a major issue; the lack of reliable power supply and internet connectivity, particularly in rural areas, makes a nationwide digital system untenable without significant investment. Institutional resistance is another key barrier. Staff members in land registries, accustomed to the manual system and the associated informal revenue streams, have often resisted the adoption of transparent digital processes. This resistance is a major factor contributing to the backlogs and inefficiencies observed even in digitally advanced states. Furthermore, public awareness and digital literacy are low among the general population, making it difficult for citizens to navigate online portals and trust a system that they cannot physically see or touch.

Despite these challenges, the prospects for digital land registration in Nigeria are transformative. A successful national system would unlock billions of dollars in "dead capital," as land titles would become secure collateral for credit. This would stimulate the mortgage and real estate sectors and fuel economic growth. The transparency inherent in a digital registry would also significantly reduce fraud and land-related conflicts. Finally, it would provide a more robust and reliable tax base for the government, enhancing public revenue collection. The Lagos and FCT models, despite their flaws, demonstrate that with political will and strategic investment, a modern, efficient, and transparent land administration system is achievable in Nigeria. The path forward, however, requires not just technology, but fundamental legal reform, institutional overhaul, and a dedicated effort to build public trust.

Discussion

The results of this study underscore that the push for digital land registration in Nigeria, while conceptually sound, is a complex undertaking with implementation varying significantly across states. The primary finding is that the success or failure of digital initiatives is not merely a matter of technology adoption but is intrinsically linked to a tripod of legal, institutional, and socio-economic factors. The overarching challenge is the fundamental disconnect between the progressive vision of a digital land registry and the antiquated legal framework encapsulated by the Land Use Act (LUA) of 1978.

The LUA's provisions, which mandate manual processes and gubernatorial consent for almost every transaction, act as a formidable legislative roadblock. The current digital systems in states like Lagos and the FCT function largely as a parallel, de facto administrative system rather than a fully

legally-recognized one. This creates a dual-system problem where the efficiency gains of digitalization are undermined by the need to revert to a manual process to satisfy the requirements of the law. Until the LUA is either comprehensively amended or repealed to accommodate electronic records and signatures as legally valid, the promise of a truly secure and seamless digital land registry will remain unfulfilled. This legal uncertainty is a major deterrent for both domestic and foreign investors who demand indisputable, verifiable titles.

Beyond the legal framework, institutional and political factors are major determinants of success. The progress in Lagos and the FCT is a direct result of sustained political will and the creation of semi-autonomous agencies like AGIS, which were given the mandate and resources to spearhead the digitalization effort. However, this success is not universally replicable. In many other states, a lack of consistent political commitment and high-level leadership has led to stalled projects and a failure to overcome resistance from entrenched interests within the bureaucracy. The study's qualitative analysis highlights that many civil servants in land ministries, who benefit from the opacity and informal fees of the manual system, actively resist the transparency of a digital registry. This institutional inertia is a silent but potent force working against reform.

The case studies also reveal the importance of a holistic approach to digitalization that extends beyond just digitizing paper records. The AGIS model, which integrated Geographic Information Systems (GIS) with land administration, provides a powerful example of how technology can not only automate processes but also fundamentally enhance the security and integrity of land titles. By creating a digital cadastral map that links a unique identifier to every plot, AGIS effectively eliminated the possibility of fraudulent double or triple allocations, a common problem under the manual system. However, even this advanced system is limited in its scope, as it primarily covers planned urban areas and struggles to incorporate vast swathes of informal, unmapped land.

Furthermore, the socio-economic challenges cannot be overlooked. The high cost of formal land registration, which includes various fees, taxes, and charges, remains a significant barrier for a large portion of the population. This financial hurdle forces many land transactions to remain in the informal sector, outside the scope of any digital system. For a digital registry to be truly transformative, it must be accessible and affordable to all citizens, including those in rural and low-income communities. This requires a re-evaluation of fee structures and the development of simplified, user-friendly interfaces that do not require high levels of digital literacy. The lack of reliable electricity and internet connectivity in many parts of the country further exacerbates this issue, creating a digital divide that mirrors the existing economic and social inequalities.

In conclusion, while the adoption of digital land registration systems in Nigeria has shown immense promise in reducing fraud and enhancing efficiency, the path to a fully functional national system is long and arduous. It requires a fundamental shift from viewing digitalization as a mere technological upgrade to recognizing it as a comprehensive reform that demands legal overhaul, political will, institutional restructuring, and an inclusive approach that addresses the needs of all citizens. The experiences of Lagos and the FCT serve as crucial blueprints, demonstrating what

is possible when these elements align, while also highlighting the persistent challenges that must be addressed for a nationwide transformation.

Conclusion

The digitization of land registration in Nigeria is a vital step toward unlocking the nation's economic potential. Our study confirms that while trailblazing efforts in states like Lagos and the FCT have demonstrated the benefits of a modern, transparent system—including reduced fraud and improved efficiency—significant challenges remain. The primary hurdles are the antiquated Land Use Act of 1978, which creates a legal paradox for digital titles, and deep-seated institutional resistance. A fragmented approach across states and a lack of public access to the technology further impede progress. To realize the full promise of digital land registration, Nigeria needs a comprehensive national strategy that includes fundamental legal reform, dedicated political leadership to overcome bureaucratic inertia, and a commitment to making the system affordable and accessible to all citizens. Only then can the country transform its vast "dead capital" into a catalyst for sustainable economic growth.

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