

**Municipal commonage and implications for land  
reform:  
A profile of commonage users in Philippolis, Free State,  
South Africa**

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## **SUMMARY**

This paper reports on a survey of municipal commonage users, which was undertaken in Philippolis in the southern Free State, in May 2005. The survey showed that a significant number of commonage users are committed to their farming enterprises, as shown by five proxy indicators: Their readiness to plough their income into their farming enterprises; their sale of livestock; their desire for more land, and their willingness to pay rental to secure such land; their desire to farm on their own; and their desire to own their own land. The paper reflects on the significance of commonage in the context of the South African government's land reform policy, and argues that commonage can transcend survivalist or subsistence production, and can be used as a "stepping stone" for emergent farmers to access their own land parcels. Finally, the paper argues that, if commonage is to become a key part in a "step-up" strategy of land reform, then appropriately sized land parcels should be made available for commonage users, to enable them to "exit" from commonage use and invest in smallholdings or small farms.

# 1. Introduction and background

In the southern provinces of South Africa, municipalities own vast tracts of agricultural land. This phenomenon is primarily found in rural towns in the Western Cape, Eastern Cape, Northern Cape and the Free State. Many modern municipalities inherited public land from their 19<sup>th</sup> Century predecessors. In some cases, this land comprised church assets, which were later sold to municipalities.

Until the 1950s, a system of open access applied. In principle, all local residents could thus make use of these lands as commonage, but it was especially meant for the poorer (white) village residents, in order for them to build or enhance their livelihoods. By the mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century, white urban residents tended to lose interest in small-scale agriculture, and commonages were increasingly let to commercial farmers, at market-related rentals. This formed a valuable source of municipal revenue.

This paper focuses primarily on the formal towns of the Free State, Northern Cape, Eastern Cape and Western Cape.<sup>2</sup> These towns have municipal commonages which are located on the peripheries of towns. After 1996, municipalities increasingly chose to terminate the leases with commercial farmers, and they began making the land available to the new class of urban poor – the urban black and coloured residents. The legal arrangements were often unclear or inadequate, and in most cases, the black farmers used the land communally. This paper reflects on the black “emergent farmers”, who keep livestock on municipal commonage.

Information is still sparse about the use of municipal commonage. Until now, there has been a lack of understanding of the kind of people who use municipal commonage, their background, their knowledge base, and their economic goals.

This paper is based on in-depth interviews with 28 commonage users, undertaken in Philippolis in the Southern Free State. The paper shows the diversity of commonage users, using the following key indicators: (1) socio-economic background; (2) different types of commonage use (based on the scale of livestock enterprises); (3) economic ambitions; and (4) views regarding land ownership.

There is some doubt about the actual role of commonage within the broader land reform programme. This paper reflects on two policy questions:

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<sup>2</sup> “Municipal commonage” should be distinguished from Namaqualand’s “Act 9 commonage”, also known as the “coloured reserves”, introduced by the National Party Government, as part of its Bantustan policy. Much of Namaqualand’s commonages is centered upon small and remote rural villages, which have used rangelands for several decades, originally governed by Management Boards, and after 1987, by the coloured “House of Representatives”. These areas were only brought under municipal jurisdictions in 2000. There have been several studies of Namaqualand’s “Act 9” commonage (for example, Wellman, 2000; Rohde *at al*, 2002).

1. Should commonage play a meaningful role as part of government’s land reform strategy?
2. Can commonage be regarded as a useful starting-point for emergent farmers, and as a “stepping-stone” towards individual land tenure?

In this paper, it is argued that commonage may function as a “nursery” for potential commercial farmers, and that, by means of a “step-up” strategy, commonage users can “graduate” from commonage towards individually utilised parcels of land. Land reform policies need to take cognisance of commonage development, in cases where commonage users are ready to become more commercially-oriented agriculturalists. As such, they are ideal candidates for land redistribution grants. The paper therefore challenges the view espoused by Anderson and Pienaar (2003) and Rohde (2003), that commonage use is primarily a survivalist activity, and should remain so.

However, the paper will also argue that, in order for commonage’s “stepping stone” potential to be exploited, a much more flexible set of land ownership options needs to be provided, to respond to the complexity of commonage users’ needs, resources and future ambitions.

## 2. The significance of municipal commonage in South Africa

There are several notable features of municipal commonage in South Africa.

A first important factor is its sheer size. A survey of municipalities, conducted by Buso (2003), found that there are at least 112 795 ha of municipal commonage in the Free State. The figure for Northern Cape is approximately 1 641 433 ha (Benseler, 2003), although this figure includes at least 1 million ha of “Act 9” land (Pienaar and May, 2003). Figures are not available for other provinces, although commonage is a typical feature of Western Cape and Eastern Cape towns.

An important issue affecting commonage development in these areas is the rapid urbanisation of the past 15 years. In 1996, South Africa’s rural population was 44.9 %, and by 2001, this had declined to 42.5% of South Africa’s total population (StatsSA, 2001: 8). The rural population had decreased by 830 000 people. Thousands of farm workers lost their jobs, as farmers cut labour costs due to the impacts of globalisation. The loss of agricultural jobs has been intensified by farmers’ fears about government land tenure policies (Simbi and Aliber, 2000). The Free State has been particularly hard hit by urbanisation trends:

**Table 1: The urban population per settlement category in the Free State, 1991 and 2001**

	Cities	Regional towns	Middle-order towns	Small towns
1991	1 028 841	124 042	257 515	245 168

2001	1 097 182	158 617	355 661	435 607
% change per annum 1991 – 2001	0,9	3,1	3,5	8,9

Source: (Marais 2004)

The influx of people into the small towns has substantially increased the pressure on municipal commonage, as the constantly increasing numbers of urban poor want to use this resource to maintain their livelihoods.

In the mid-1990s, the ANC Government identified commonage as a pillar of its land reform programme. According to the White Paper on Land Policy (DLA, 1997):

“In large parts of the country, in small rural towns and settlements, poor people need to gain access to grazing land and small arable / garden areas in order to supplement their income and to enhance household food security. The Department of Land Affairs will encourage local authorities to develop the conditions that will **enable poor residents to access existing commonage**, currently used for other purposes. Further, the Department will provide funds to enable resource-poor municipalities to **acquire additional land for this purpose.**”

As part of the Government’s land reform programme, funding was made available to municipalities to purchase private farms to add to their commonage holdings. Between 1996 and 2002, 78 commonage projects were funded by DLA, and a total of 420 812 ha were acquired by municipalities Anderson and Pienaar, 2003: 12), in terms of the *Provision of Land and Assistance Act* (Act 126 of 1993). This funding pattern has recently slowed significantly, perhaps indicating an official ambivalence about the merits of commonage as a part of land reform.

DLA’s commonage policy accommodates “both subsistence and emerging farmers”, but these are required to be “poor residents” - although no definition of “poor” is provided (DLA, 2002: 10). In principle, DLA’s approach is amenable to the principle of commonage land as a stepping stone for farmers wishing to produce for the market and who will eventually come to own land for commercial farming. In its public pronouncements, DLA appeared to anticipate that such farmers would gradually move out of the commonage. However, DLA has not produced or actively encouraged an “exit strategy” for commonage users. In practice, therefore, DLA’s approach to commonage is biased towards subsistence use, because few viable exit options exist for commonage farmers. As will be shown below, this ambivalence surrounding commonage has led to disagreements amongst observers about what its primary purpose should be.

A significant amount of research has highlighted the administrative difficulties of municipalities, the poor management practices of commonage committees, the unresolved attitudes of the Department of Land Affairs, and the patchy support of provincial Departments of Agriculture (Cartwright, Benseler and Harrison’s study of Emthanjeni Municipality in De Aar (2004); Buso (2003); Benseler (2003); Benseler’s study of the Pofadder area (2003); and Atkinson, Benseler and Pienaar, 2005).

However, a lacuna in the research to date consists in the understanding of commonage farmers' attitudes towards agriculture, and their goals about future development. There has been the temptation, on the part of municipalities and DLA policy-makers, to regard commonage users as a single undifferentiated category. The Philippolis study was concerned to uncover the important variations within this category, in terms of socio-economic status and resources; scale of commonage farming enterprises; and their future goals.

The overriding argument, in this paper, is that, until one understands the divergent dynamics of commonage use, one cannot suitable land access policies and technical support programmes to support commonage farmers.

### **3. Philippolis commonage: A land system under strain**

Philippolis is located in the southern Free State, 30 km north of the Orange River. It is the oldest settlement in the Free State, dating from the 1820s, when it began as a mission station. Subsequently, the town became the capital of the Griqua kingdom (until 1862), and thereafter it was sold to the Free State Republic.

During , Philippolis 1962, Philippolis had its own municipality. In 2000, it was absorbed into a larger municipal entity, called Kopanong Municipality. Kopanong includes eight other towns: Trompsburg (the municipal capital), Fauresmith, Jagersfontein, Edenburg, Springfontein, Gariiep Dam, Bethulie and Reddersburg. Each of these towns is now managed by a "Unit Supervisor", and basic clerical and technical staff. Policy-making emanates from the headquarters in Trompsburg.

Philippolis was one of the first municipalities in the Free State to make commonage available for local black stock-holders. It took this decision in 1998, and thereby pre-empted much of the political conflict which came to characterize commonage access in towns such as Trompsburg. Gradually, sections (called "camps") of the commonage were leased to local black users, at reduced rentals.

In Philippolis, the municipal commonage of 3 491 ha is divided into five camps and used for livestock farming. Buso (2003) gives a picture of the conditions prevailing on the commonage. Users of the commonage are organised into a stock committee, then consisting of 35 members, with seven members forming an executive council and each member paying R120 per annum. The committee maintains its own bank account. Access to the commonage land is fairly easy. The committee is open and accommodating, in the sense that people who used to work for commercial farmers but who had lost their jobs are welcome to join the committee, provided they produce a formal letter of request. By 2005, the number of commonage users has increased to about 55.

The commonage management system in Kopanong Municipality is extremely fragmented and unclear. Each town in the municipality still manages its commonage in terms of contracts drafted before 2000, or those concluded on an *ad hoc* basis since then. There is no commonage management policy. Kopanong Municipality has received funding from the Development Bank of South Africa to draft a commonage policy, but by August 2005, this had not yet commenced, due to bureaucratic delays within the municipality.

There are numerous management problems facing the Philippolis commonage. These stem primarily from the fact that the rights and obligations of the municipality and the commonage users are unclear. This leads to frustration for both parties. The unsatisfactory contractual system results in many dysfunctions, including poor maintenance of infrastructure, overgrazing, and poor payment of rentals. None of these problems is unique to Philippolis, as previous studies have already indicated (Benseler, 2003; Cartwright, Benseler and Harrison, 2004).

At present, there is no “exit system” from the Philippolis commonage. The commonage committee re-negotiates its contract with the municipality every five years, and commonage users are virtually assured that they can use the commonage land in the long-term. Furthermore, the lack of municipal monitoring of livestock numbers means that there is effectively no limit to the number of livestock which can be kept on the commonage. The Stock Committee believes that there is a dire shortage of camps because users own large and growing numbers of sheep and goats (Buso, 2003: 60).

#### 4. The Philippolis survey

In the Philippolis survey, conducted in May 2005, a total of 28 commonage farmers were interviewed. This represented half the current commonage users.

Commonage farming is largely, but not exclusively, a male domain, with 79% of the users in the survey being men. Table 2 shows that commonage farming is attracting primarily middle-aged and elderly people:

**Table 2: Age profile of Philippolis commonage users**

Age bracket	Number of users
20-40 years	3
41-60 years	15
61+ years	10
Total	28

Table 3 shows their employment profile:

**Table 3: Employment profile of Philippolis commonage users**

<b>Employment status</b>	<b>Number of users</b>	<b>Percentage of users</b>
Full-time	11	39
Odd jobs / piece work	5	18
Retired / unemployed	12	43
Total	28	100.0

The majority of the users are unemployed or retired, suggesting that their use of the commonage may well be a hedge against destitution. But eleven other commonage users had other sources of permanent income. The largest employment category was municipal workers (5 people, or 18% of the survey). Two people were employed as gardeners or labourers. Only two gave their profession as “farmer”, suggesting that they are currently committed to their commonage farming activities on a full-time basis. Furthermore, in nine of the 28 cases (30%), another household member had an income.

The commonage land in Philippolis is used exclusively for livestock ownership, with no cultivation taking place. Of the 28 interviewees, the majority (20 people) own large stock (cattle). Sixteen people own small stock, such as sheep and goats. Ten people own pigs, and two people own horses and donkeys (mainly for transport purposes).

The number of livestock owned by these farmers differs widely. In the Philippolis survey, the commonage users can be divided into four categories:

**Table 4: Categories of livestock ownership**

<b>Group</b>	<b>Livestock ownership category</b>	<b>Number of users</b>	<b>Percentage of users</b>
Group 1	Up to 10 head of livestock	16	57
Group 2	Between 11 and 30 head of livestock	6	21
Group 3	Between 31 and 100 head of livestock	4	4
Group 4	More than 100 head of livestock	2	7

It is tempting to assume that commonage land is being used primarily by those who have no other source of livelihood, i.e. as a subsistence hedge against food insecurity. But the facts reveal that several of the commonage users have other sources of livelihood. Table 5 shows that employment profiles are spread across all the stock ownership categories:

**Table 5: Sources of earnings of commonage users**

	<b>Group 1</b>	<b>Group 2</b>	<b>Group 3</b>	<b>Group 4</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>
<b>Fulltime jobs</b>	5	2	2	2	<b>11</b>



<b>Part-time jobs/ Odd jobs</b>	3	2	0	0	5
<b>Retired / unemployed</b>	8	2	2	0	12
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>28</b>

This suggests that people's livelihood profiles are very divergent. Some people may have substantial monetary resources from salaries and wages, and plough this income into their stock farming. Other people with the same monetary income may have only a few head of livestock. Several farmers (39% of the survey) have full-time jobs, suggesting that they do farming as a hobby, or because they want a supplementary source of income.

Another way of assessing the asset profile of the commonage users is to compare people's livestock ownership with their type of occupation.

**Table 6: Commonage users' professions**

	<b>Group 1</b>	<b>Group 2</b>	<b>Group 3</b>	<b>Group 4</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>
<b>Unemployed/retired</b>	10	3	2	0	12
<b>Gardener/labourer</b>	1	1	0	0	2
<b>Municipal worker</b>	4	0	0	1	5
<b>Domestic worker</b>	1	1	0	0	2
<b>Farmer</b>	0	0	1	1	2
<b>Businessmen</b>	0	1	1	0	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>28</b>

The largest category of employed people is that of municipal workers. These are relatively highly paid workers in small towns. Two of the middle-range livestock owners are businessmen. Two commonage users already define themselves as "farmers", indicating that they regard themselves as beyond the category of part-time stock owner.

The interviewees were asked about their ownership of various assets, including houses, vehicles and agricultural land. Ownership of assets was fairly evenly distributed amongst Group 1-4, suggesting that Group 1 stock owners (with the smallest number of livestock) are not necessarily the poorest of the farmers. For example, four of the 16 members of Group 1 own a car, and two own a pick-up truck; in the case of Group 2, all six own a vehicle.

The analysis shows that the characteristics of commonage users differ greatly. Some of the Group 1 farmers are indeed poor, with few assets, and their few head of livestock enable them to "survive", or eke out a living. But there are many others who have other assets and income streams.

This is consonant with other studies which have shown the diversity of rural livelihood strategies, even under ostensibly similar living conditions. For example, Low, Akwenye and Kamwi (1999: 340), writing about northern Namibia, differentiate between

“subsistence family farms” and “commercial family farms”. Makhura, Goode and Coetzee (1998: 440) found seven categories of farmers in the KaNgwane area, viz. “very low commercial households”, “moderately commercial households”, “high agricultural commercial households”, “livestock commercial households”, “non-farm income commercial households”, non-farm and agricultural commercial households”, and “highly commercial households”. Anseeuw *et al* (2001) distinguish between seven categories: the autonomous farmers, the livestock holders, the regular income earners, the irregular income earners, the family dependants, the social transfer dependants and the poorest residents. This study observed that micro-level diversity tends to be high, due to the unequal distribution of means conditioning farming production (such as access to financial resources, markets and knowledge).

## 5. Commonage users’ agricultural goals

Clearly, there is a continuum of income and wealth levels amongst the Philippolis commonage users. So why do they farm? Do they constitute a new agricultural class, or is their farming activity the sign of desperation and poverty? Is it people’s first choice for a livelihood, or a fall-back option after everything else has failed? Is stock ownership a new type of agricultural commercialism, or simply a type of insurance policy against a “rainy day”?

In the Philippolis survey, all the commonage farmers (with the exception of one) wanted to increase their livestock. Might this indicate that they aspire to becoming commercial farmers?

Table 7 shows that people use commonage for a wide variety of reasons:

**Table 7: Reasons for commonage use in Philippolis**

Reasons for farming (multiple responses allowed)	Number of mentions	Percent
Additional income/commercial reasons	13	36
Personal progress	2	6
Customary practice	2	6
Emotional commitment (“I love to farm”/ “I love my animals”)	13	36
Long term investment	2	6
To gain farming knowledge	4	11
Total	36	100

Commercial considerations (additional income, long term investment) are prevalent. But just as many regard farming as important from a subjective point of view, as a form of personal progress or as an emotional commitment. Some individuals want to improve

their farming knowledge. This complexity suggests that *some* commonage users may wish to farm commercially, whereas others may prefer to farm primarily for subsistence, or for recreational or cultural reasons.

The interests of various commonage users evidently diverge quite widely. It is tempting to conclude that Group 1 commonage users, who own the least livestock, are the poorest, and Group 4 the wealthiest. It is also tempting to assume that Group 1 farmers have survivalist motives, whereas Group 4 farmers want to farm commercially. However, neither of these assumptions is necessarily true. Commonage users may have very different levels of income or assets, and they may hold different numbers of stock for very different reasons.

The Group1-4 schema in Table 4 intersects with another typology, reflecting the commonage users' livelihood strategies and agricultural ambitions. By combining the resource base and farming motivations of the Philippolis commonage users, we derived the following categorization:

- *Survivalists*: Households with few alternative sources of income (perhaps other than social grants or pensions), and who are likely to continue using livestock to fulfill basic food security needs.
- *Micro-farmers*: They have other livelihoods, and want to keep only a certain limited number of livestock, as an income supplement, or as a hobby, or for cultural purposes.
- *Emergent small-scale farmers*: They show signs of commercialization: for example, they may have bank accounts, they would like access to loans, they may want to farm on their own (i.e. not in a group), and they would like to farm on a larger scale, to make some profit. These farmers may be good candidates for ownership of small-holdings, where they could either undertake small-scale agriculture, or combine this with other income-generating activities.
- *Proto-capitalist farmers*: People who may have other livelihoods, but would like to go into commercial farming on a full-time or large-scale basis. For them, livestock and capital accumulation is important. Acquiring property may also be important. These farmers would be ideal candidates for a “step-up” land reform strategy, i.e. opting out of commonage use and finding their own farm.

The Philippolis survey shows that there is no obvious correlation between the farming motivations of farmers and their current level of stock ownership. A Group 1 person, for example, may be either a survivalist, or a micro-farmer, or an emergent small-scale farmer, or a proto-capitalist farmer. Their current level of stock ownership is no indication of *why* they want to farm. Their goals are as important as their level of stock ownership, although the scale of their farming enterprises may differ. Some people may have only a few head of livestock, but, given the opportunity, may want to become emergent small-scale farmers, or proto-capitalist farmers. Other people may own quite large numbers of cattle or sheep, but do not have any real ambition to grow their farming enterprises on a commercial basis.

Consequently commonage management planning should include scope for a variety of economic, spatial and land tenure options. Some users are likely to prefer to remain on the commonage land, whether on an individual or communal tenure basis, whereas others may wish to “exit” from the commonage and acquire or rent small holdings or farms.

To explore the nature of people’s motivations for farming, some proxy indicators can be used. In this study, four hypotheses were constructed to illustrate the degree of commercialization of commonage users: (1) commonage users are willing to purchase inputs improve their livestock, (2) users sell their livestock, (3) users are willing to pay a reasonable rental in order to access more commonage land, (4) users would prefer to farm individually instead of communally, and (5) users would prefer to own their own land.

These are not ideal indicators, because they are somewhat susceptible to influence by extraneous factors, as will be shown below. Nevertheless, they offer an approximate assessment of commonage users’ farming goals.

## 5.1 Investment into farming operating costs

Commonage users were asked how much money they spent on veterinary medicine, home-made medicine, dipping, fodder, and the repairs of commonage infrastructure (such as fences, pumps, troughs and pipes).

**Table 8: Expenditure on livestock**

<b>Expenses on commonage livestock: May 2004-May 2005</b>	<b>Number of users</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
R0-R100	8	29
R101- R500	8	29
R501- R1000	3	11
R1001- R2000	6	21
More than R2001	3	11
Total	28	100

Table 8 shows that the majority of farmers spent relatively little (less than R800), but nine interviewees spent more than R1000.

This proxy indicator is not totally effective, because the significance of these amounts as an indicator of financial investment depends greatly on the amount of income earned by the commonage users. Nevertheless, it does suggest that several of the Philippolis commonage users are ploughing large amounts of money into their livestock enterprises.

## 5.2 The sale of livestock

The sale of livestock is a possible indicator of the degree of commercialization of commonage users. However, this can represent two different types of commercialization, depending on the use of the revenue generated. If the revenue is used for household needs, it shows a limited involvement in the market; but if the revenue is ploughed back into the farming enterprise, it suggests that agricultural investment is important.

The sale of livestock is not a perfect proxy indicator for commercialization, because it may be influenced by the accessibility of local markets and abattoirs (Buso 2003), as well as the condition of the livestock. Commonage users tend to be reluctant to sell livestock during periods of drought, because the livestock is in poor condition (Stock Committee chairman, pers comm.).

As Table 9 shows, the majority of commonage users had not sold livestock in the previous year:

**Table 9: Sale of livestock**

	No animals sold	1-10 animals sold	>10 sold	Total
Group 1	14	2	0	16
Group 2	3	2	1	6
Group 3	1	1	2	4
Group 4	0	1	1	2
Total	18	6	4	28

A relatively small number had sold between 1 and 10 head of livestock, and an even smaller number had sold more than 10 head of livestock. Clearly, for many commonage users, stock sales are not a major feature of commonage use. This suggests that the users that they ‘bank’ their wealth in their livestock – a phenomenon which becomes a huge problem for environmental management.

The sale of larger numbers of livestock occurred amongst those farmers who have a relatively large herd or flock. These farmers are becoming more “commercial” in their farming orientation, where “commercialization” can be defined as the selling of agricultural products, or working off-farm to earn an income which is used to acquire other basic household goods (Makhura, Goode and Coetzee, 1998).

When comparing livestock sales with the categories of full-time employment, part-time employment, and unemployed, there does not appear to be a trend. Of the four people who had sold relatively large numbers of livestock (more than 10 animals), two were in the unemployed category, and two were employed full-time.

The sale of animals was also compared with the professions of the commonage users. It might be expected that unemployed or retired commonage users, or those with poorly paid jobs, would sell some of their livestock to generate an income. Six of the twelve unemployed commonage users had sold livestock in the previous year. This left six unemployed commonage users who had not sold any livestock, who may either be accumulating their herds, or preferring to use livestock for other purposes, such as slaughter, milk production or social and ceremonial functions. Presumably these residents are able to live off other income sources, such as pensions, wages of family members, or remittances.

Another way of understanding people's commercial motivations is to ask how they used the proceeds of livestock sales. Of the ten people who had sold livestock, five had used the money for household expenses (indicating a primarily subsistence use of livestock), while five had ploughed the money back into their farming activities (suggesting a more investment-oriented approach to farming). One person used the revenue for both household and investment purposes. Four had saved the money.

These findings show that there is a range of motivations among commonage users. An important aspect of a proper commonage strategy would be to understand the variety of motivations of commonage users, so that appropriate livelihood options can be designed, from which people can make their own choices. Such strategies should include a mix of land access options, extension services, and financial services.

### **5.3 Commonage farmers' willingness to pay rental for more access to land**

Commonage farmers' willingness to pay rental can be used as a proxy indicator for their desire to farm commercially. It is hypothesised that farmers who wish to farm commercially would be eager to expand their access to land, and would be willing to pay rent to secure such access. Once again, this is not a perfect indicator, because commonage users' willingness to pay rent is influenced by the poor condition of municipal infrastructure (Buso 2003), as well as poorly enforced lease arrangements.

There is also some disagreement about what constitutes a "reasonable rental". In Philippiolis, current rental levels are highly subsidised, and are much lower than the commercial levels of land rentals (Buso, 2003: 29). The Stock Committee is required to pay an amount of R11 000 to the municipality per annum. Kopanong Municipality still has no policy on commonage management or rentals. In the interviews, the figure of R50/head of livestock/annum was used as a guide.

One way of testing commonage farmers' seriousness about their future agricultural activities, is to ask whether they would be prepared to pay rent for additional land:

**Table 10: Willingness to pay rent for more land**

	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>Total</b>
Group 1	14	2	16
Group 2	6	0	6
Group 3	3	1	4
Group 4	1	1	2
TOTAL	24	4	28

In the Philippolis case study, the majority of interviewees claimed that they would be willing to pay rental if they secured additional land.

There were four farmers who stated explicitly that they do not want to pay more rentals for additional land. Some black farmers still believe that land is a “free good”, and seem to want to be subsidised by the municipality in perpetuity. This raises questions about their degree of commercial thinking.

The Philippolis study, which indicates that the majority of commonage users are prepared to pay rental for additional commonage land, seems to contradict the currently poor levels of rental payments in many towns. Buso (2003: 33) found that 22 Free State towns experienced satisfactory payments, whereas 13 towns experienced poor levels of payment. There has been no proper study of *why* some municipalities experience difficulties with rental payments, but there are some preliminary indications that it is due to poorly-drafted and weakly enforced leasing systems. Many municipalities (including Kopanong Municipality, in whose jurisdiction Philippolis falls) determine the fees by *hectare of land*, and not according to *head of livestock*. The group as a whole is held responsible for the payment of rental for an entire field. In Philippolis, for example, payment is channelled through the Stock Committee. This has the advantage of relieving the municipality of the burden of having to collect the money from the individual farmers. But if the group structure is weak – as is the case in Philippolis - it is unable to extract people’s share of the rental. This leads to a Hardin-type “tragedy of the commons” (see Hardin 1968) and consequent overgrazing. The source of the problem is that insufficient attention has been paid by DLA, as well as by municipalities, to the legal dimensions of commonage management (Pienaar and May, 2003: 6; Anderson and Pienaar, 2003:21).

There are two possible improvements to this dysfunctional leasing system. Firstly, *if* land is to be used communally, then rentals should be determined *per head of livestock*, and not per hectare. This would enable clear tracking of defaulters who fail to pay for the livestock they keep. Secondly, *if* land were to be leased per hectare, then it should not be based on communal use. It should be leased to individuals, who are made responsible for paying their lease. In both scenarios, a degree of individuation is necessary to keep individuals responsible for rental payments, and to prevent the “tragedy of the commons”. If such changes were made, and if municipalities were more likely to charge market-related fees for the use of commonage, the issue of rental payments would become a proxy indicator for commonage farmers’ commercial ambitions.

Commonage users’ ambivalence towards paying rental suggests that:

1. Some farmers may still be relatively “uncommercialised”, in that they regard natural resources as communal resources, and are not willing to commit their own money to financing their agricultural overheads
2. Some farmers are willing to pay rentals, but the municipalities’ administrative systems and contract systems have been too weak to enforce payment
3. Some farmers may be more likely to “exit” from commonage onto their own land (with all the financial responsibilities that that entails), if more realistic commonage rentals were levied and enforced (Bradstock, 2003).

To return to the question of commonage users’ seriousness about accessing more land, and *being willing to pay for its use*: It is likely that the poor levels of rental payment experienced by so many municipalities does not reflect on commonage farmers’ willingness to pay for land use. Instead, it reflects on the currently inappropriate leasing systems. The willingness to pay additional rental is not a perfect proxy indicator for the commercialization of commonage farmers, because farmer’s attitudes are affected by the dysfunctions of the current rental system. But it does suggest a degree of land hunger.

#### **5.4 A variety of commonage tenure options: Individual and communal tenure**

In most municipalities, commonage is utilized communally. Impressionistic evidence suggests that this is a source of frustration for commonage users, who are not able to manage the land according to their own judgment. In particular, those farmers who want to enlarge their livestock holdings are likely to become frustrated. This issue is therefore used as a proxy indicator for farmers’ desire to farm more commercially.

In the Philippolis survey, a large majority of commonage users (19 out of 28) want to farm on their own. Only nine stated specifically that they would prefer to farm communally. However, the effectiveness of the proxy indicator is somewhat undermined by the many management problems which farmers encounter, as reflected in Table 11:

**Table 11: Reasons for wanting to farm individually**

	<b>Number of mentions</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Too much conflict in a group / difficult to manage	16	57
Wants to work for his own benefit / keep produce for self	1	4
Can keep more livestock	2	7
Did not answer	9	32



Total	28	100.0
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The table suggests widespread frustration with communal management. It also shows people's frustration with the limited availability of land, and the belief that having one's own land will enable more livestock to be kept (this is not entirely true, because it depends on the size of such land). It is only once such management problems are rectified, that the proxy indicator would be fully effective.

## 5.5 Desire to own land

A final test of commonage farmers' desire to farm more commercially is their desire to own land of their own. This would indicate a willingness to invest in infrastructure and other requisites.

Table 12 shows the overwhelming desire of Philippolis commonage users to own their own land:

**Table 12: Preference to own agricultural land**

	Number of mentions	Percent
Yes	25	89.3
No	3	10.7
Total	28	100.0

Table 13 shows the reasons which commonage users gave for wanting to own their own land:

**Table 13: Reasons for wanting to own a farm**

Reason for wanting to own a farm	Number of mentions	Percent
Inheritance	2	8
Post-retirement occupation	2	8
Can make own decisions	14	54
Can have more stock	7	27
Want to grow vegetables	1	4
Total	26	100

Two main features are evident: People's desire to manage their own land, and to increase their livestock holdings. This suggests that there is "land hunger" amongst commonage

users. In some towns, the demand for agricultural land is reaching crisis proportions, and some towns (such as Trompsburg) have seen violent demonstrations and land invasions.

Once again, however, the proxy indicator would be most effective if commonage users were fully conversant with the practical and financial challenges associated with land ownership.

## **6. Policy implications: Commonage as a land reform strategy**

There is an urgent need for municipalities to draft commonage management plans, to bring some order into their often chaotic management systems, and to get some kind of developmental vision for the future. To achieve this, sustained and holistic support will be needed from national departments such as Agriculture, Land Affairs, Provincial and Local Government, and Water Affairs and Forestry.

By understanding commonage users' experience, background, resources and developmental goals, much better local policies and institutions can be crafted. Their perspectives have significant implications for the drafting of future policies. Commonage users have repeatedly urged government to purchase additional commonage land, or to assist commonage users to access their own land (Atkinson, Benseler and Pienaar, 2005).

However, DLA's expenditure on the commonage programme has declined. In 2002 only 2% of land transferred within the redistribution programme was for municipal commonage (Anderson and Pienaar, 2003: 7). Furthermore, the Department of Land Affairs is ambivalent about the role of commonage in the broader land reform scenario, because it is focused primarily on individual tenure in the LRAD programme, and possibly because it is doubtful of municipal capacity to manage commonage land.

There have been calls for commonage to be regarded as a key part of land reform. Anderson and Pienaar (2003:31) argue that:

“Commonage provides a relatively inexpensive and potentially very effective option for land reform. The municipal government system means that the necessary regulatory framework for rights administration and land management is already in place. Municipal legislation both empowers local authorities to act as agents of development and ensures that management is devolved to the lowest possible level. The municipality as the land holding entity is not a top-down, absentee landlord, but a key agent of local economic development.”

There are four arguments for commonage being an important aspect of land reform. Firstly, commonage land is often the only natural resource available for poor urban communities, particularly in land-locked areas without access to fisheries. Commonage is

readily accessible to the poor, because it is located close to residential areas, and does not require much capital to develop. It should therefore be a first-line strategy for supporting household food production.

Secondly, municipalities already own commonage land. It does not have to be purchased at great expense. This suggests that commonage development has *prima facie* importance as a component of land reform.

Thirdly, commonage development has great potential for spin-off economic development, such as local markets, local capital accumulation, local skills training, and linkages between farms and non-farm activities. Non-farm activities are important to the welfare of farm households in sub-Saharan Africa, for immediate food security through providing money to buy food, to buy farm inputs, and to provide outlets for production (Machethe, Reardon and Mead, 1997: 377).

Fourthly, it offers a valuable opportunity for experience and learning in collaborative or co-operative social institutions, such as commonage committees, farmers' associations, banks and co-operatives. These institutions are typically located in the small towns. Commonage is therefore a valuable "school for economic citizenship" for people who have been marginalised and disempowered for almost all their lives. It can also help in creating a new generation of young farmers, and thereby restore the image of agriculture as an attractive career option.

However, the potential of commonage as an important component of land reform is open to two different interpretations. One view regards commonage primarily as a survivalist activity: "For the majority of South Africa's rural poor, owning livestock acts as a buffer against destitution caused by unemployment or failure to receive sufficient income by other means" (Anderson and Pienaar, 2003: 20). For these authors, subsistence agriculture on commonage land is not an incipient, or embryonic, form of commercial agriculture. They are supported by Rohde *et al* (2001:2), who argue that production objectives between commercial and subsistence forms of agriculture, and consequently management approaches, differ radically. Anderson and Pienaar argue that few commonage participants can in fact afford to access land through the LRAD programme, since they would not qualify for enough land for a viable commercial farming venture. For these authors, commonage should not be seen as a springboard for more commercial types of land reform, such as LRAD. They bolster their argument by the fact that commonage farmers have not used commonage as a "stepping stone" to commercial farming options, and that there has been a low rate of "exit" from commonage (Hall, 2003).

This argument has five weaknesses. The first is the assumption that commonage farmers want to engage in full-time agriculture (i.e. a single livelihood). In fact, it is quite possible that commonage users may want to farm part-time – and therefore "top up" their agricultural incomes with non-farm incomes. The importance of mixed livelihoods has been widely recognised in the literature. For example, Anseeuw *et al* (2001) have shown

how diversification of incomes tends to reduce risks and uncertainties, while ensuring a basic food production for home consumption.

The second fallacious assumption is that all commonage farmers are poor or destitute, battling for survival. As noted above, numerous studies have shown that emergent farmers, who have roughly similar land resources, tend to have very different agricultural strategies and levels of production. The Philippolis study suggests that commonage users' resources are more complex than generally understood, and that fairly affluent residents, some with full-time employment, are using the municipal commonage. It can be argued that commonage users, particularly those who have previous entrepreneurial experience, or who can plough their wages into farming, may be more successful land reform candidates than those with very few resources and with little experience in the modern economy.

The third weakness of the argument is to use the current reluctance of commonage farmers to "exit" as evidence that they do not want to farm commercially. In fact, the regime of low rentals and poor enforcement of rental payment is probably the primary factor in encouraging commonage farmers not to venture into the more risky option of individual tenure (Bradstock, 2003).

The fourth factor is the paucity of appropriately sized land parcels located near the towns. Few towns have sufficient small-holdings and small farms available for commonage farmers who want to "exit" from commonage.

The fifth factor is that DLA has turned down applications by commonage farmers for LRAD funding to purchase smallholdings. In Philippolis, several such cases have taken place during 2003-5. These applications were turned down – on the advice of Department of Agriculture officials - ostensibly because the smallholdings are too small to be economically viable. The concept of "mixed livelihoods" has clearly not yet penetrated the Free State Department of Agriculture. Furthermore, the "stepping stone" view is not yet accepted by provincial DLA officials, who focus exclusively on purchasing large farms. Consequently, the required support systems (extension officers), appropriate land parcels, or credit systems, have simply not yet been made available for commonage farmers, to assist them to exit from commonage.

It will be necessary to create appropriate land parcels for commonage users who decide to "step up" from commonage use. Such parcels of land may be smallholdings (rental or ownership), small farms, and eventually, commercially-sized farms. On the smaller land parcels, intensive agriculture or mixed rural-urban livelihoods could be practised.

What the Philippolis case study shows, is not only the urgency for addressing commonage as part of a coherent land access system, but that a wide variety of spatial and land tenure options needs to be provided. This would enable commonage users to "self-select" the land packages which they can afford, and which would suit their asset base and their economic goals. Such packages could include:

- Commonage-based communal farming (rental of camps on a group basis)
- Commonage-based individual farming (rental of camps on an individual basis)
- Individually or group-rented small-holdings
- Individually or group-owned small-holdings
- Individually or group-owned farms.

The peri-urban areas would be a very good place to begin introducing such a basket of land options, as many towns already have small-holdings which have been demarcated and provided with appropriate infrastructural services.

## Conclusion

The experience of the Philippolis commonage users suggests that commonage land should be regarded as one land reform instrument within a suite of land reform strategies. The argument for commonage as a “stepping stone” to privately-owned land is of major importance here. Commonage offers opportunities for first-level accumulation of capital, entrepreneurial experience, and economic networks. As such, it is a key support for other land reform strategies. Commonage use promotes the commercialisation of emergent farmers, as some farmers are already selling agricultural surpluses, and use farm or off-farm revenue to plough back into their farming operations.

While many commonage farmers will always remain “survivalist”, others are potentially suitable candidates for commercial agriculture. However, they are most likely to succeed as part-time farmers (i.e. pursuing “mixed livelihoods”), and not as full-time farmers. It will be important to recognise the diversity of commonage users. Extension support should be tailored more closely to different *types* of commonage user. It has been widely recognised that farming households may respond differently towards development and support initiatives (e.g. Anseeuw *et al*, 2001).

The use of commonage as a key component of a land reform strategy will have the advantage of bringing land reform closer to the urban poor, and simultaneously allowing more commercially-oriented small farmers to “step up” from municipal commonage to individual land tenure.

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