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

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### **Abstract**

*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.

'Municipal commonages' originated at the time that towns were formally established (DLA 2006: 6), usually in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. As part of the process, the State granted village or town councils significant tracts of land that surrounded the residential settlement. The land was available for the use of the towns' residents, typically to keep animals for slaughter, draught

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animals and milk cows. It was generally reserved only for white residents. 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, close to market-related rentals. The land was attractive, because it was located close to town (and facilities such as abattoirs), and at that stage, there was a very low crime rate in and around the towns.

Municipalities benefited from this arrangement because it involved low management costs, and yielded significant rentals. Typically, the land was put out to tender, and municipalities selected the highest bidders. This formed a valuable source of municipal revenue.

The case discussed in this paper resembles many formal towns in the Free State, Northern Cape, Eastern Cape and Western Cape.<sup>2</sup> The histories and experiences of these towns have been broadly similar, and their commonage situation today shares many of the same characteristics (DLA 2005). 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

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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. (Namaqualand, on the west coast of South Africa, was destined to be a “coloured homeland” under the apartheid regime, and hence significant land parcels were acquired for the use of “coloured” residents). Much of Namaqualand’s commonages are centred 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 et al, 2002).

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:

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.

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. Only in this way can municipal commonage assist in South Africa's land reform process.

## **2. The significance of municipal commonage in South Africa and the link with land reform**

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 Namaqualand "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.

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. The corollary of this argument is that until one understands the dynamics of commonage use better, it is also hard to situate the role of commonage within the broader land reform debate within South Africa, which is the main objective in this paper.

In the literature, 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 – in theory – 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).

By default, the ANC Government’s commonage policy has remained a “pro-poor” one, because it is biased towards survivalist users. 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 emergent 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 or rent private land for commercial farming. In its public pronouncements, DLA appeared to anticipate that such farmers would gradually move out of the commonage, but it remained profoundly unclear what would become of these farmers. DLA has not produced or actively encouraged an "exit strategy" for commonage users, whether for full-time or part-time farming. There has been no investigation of land access alternatives for commonage farmers who need to "exit" from commonage land; there is no government assistance for rental land; and there are no attempts to create a viable peri-urban spatial strategy for small-scale farmers (whether full-time or part-time). The fact that such alternatives have not featured in DLA's policy pronouncements, with the exclusive focus on individual ownership of large tracts of agricultural land, means that commonage farmers' options have been severely constrained.

In practice, therefore, DLA's approach to commonage is biased towards subsistence use, simply 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.

The empirical data collected for this paper argues the opposite: municipal commonage *can* contribute to land reform, in the sense of providing an exit strategy for full-time or part-time emergent farmers, who want to farm on a more commercial basis. This is not to argue that *all* commonage should be used for emergent commercial farmers. It would be desirable to reserve some commonage land for the urban poor. But a much more systematic approach towards supporting emergent commercial farmers should be found.

It is to this empirical data that we now turn, beginning with a short profile of the Philippiolis commonage system.



### 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.

Until 1999, Philippolis had its own municipality. In 2000, with the watershed re-demarcation of municipalities, Philippolis was absorbed into a larger municipal entity, called Kopanong Municipality. Kopanong includes eight other towns: Trompsburg (the municipal capital), Fauresmith, Jagersfontein, Edenburg, Springfontein, Gariep 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, 60 km away from Philippolis.

Like all the Karoo towns, Philippolis is a very poor community, and the level of poverty is increasing all the time, due to in-migration of unemployed and piece-work farm workers:

**Table 2: Black and coloured income levels in Philippolis, 1996 and 2001**

Income per annum	Number of households			
	Black		Coloured	
	1996	2001	1996	2001
R0-R2400	21	59	2	12
2400-6000	150	166	28	71
6000-12000	516	414	409	260
12000-18000	131	159	41	91
18000-30000	183	279	65	137
30000-42000	56	123	69	65
42000-54000	0	45	27	35
54000-72000	0	29	27	38
72000-96000	0	13	0	28
96000-132000	53	17	75	33
132000-192000	0	47	0	63
192000-360000	0	0	0	0
360000+	0	0	0	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>1110</b>	<b>1350</b>	<b>743</b>	<b>833</b>

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. This is, by default, an “open access” system, and is certainly unsustainable in the medium- and long-term.

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. During 2006, DLA drafted a new set of commonage guidelines, with *pro forma* contracts and regulations. But these have not yet been officially promulgated and have therefore not yet made any impact on municipal practice.

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).

By making commonage land available to collectives of black emergent farmers, municipalities’ difficulties have escalated. Not only are there many more management complexities when dealing with large groups of poorly organised commonage users, but the level of rentals for commonage land have been reduced drastically compared to the leases granted to commercial

farmers. This has led to a decline in municipal revenue. There is a real opportunity cost for municipalities in using commonage land for survivalist farmers.

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 livestock owners in the survey being men.

Regarding age, Table 3 shows that commonage farming is attracting primarily middle-aged and elderly people:

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

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

Table 4 shows their employment profile:

**Table 4: Employment profile of Philippolis commonage users**

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

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. These findings pose key questions for the future: Did people become wealthy due to stock-ownership, or vice versa?

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 rough categories. The demarcation of these categories is somewhat arbitrary, but it does indicate that there is a continuum of farming scale on the Philippolis commonage:

**Table 5: Categories of livestock ownership**

Group	Livestock ownership category	Number of users	Percentage of users
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 6 shows that employment profiles are spread across all the stock ownership categories:

**Table 6: Sources of earnings of commonage users**

	Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	Group 4	Total
Fulltime jobs	5	2	2	2	11
Part-time jobs/Odd jobs	3	2	0	0	5
Retired/Unemployed	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. The issue of livelihoods is, of course, a much more complex one than these typologies reflect. A more detailed study would be required to investigate the complex linkages between revenue from farming, combined with employment, pensions, remittances, informal trading, and services.

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

**Table 7: Commonage users' professions**

	Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	Group 4	Total
Unemployed/retired	10	3	2	0	12
Gardener/labourer	1	1	0	0	2
Municipal worker	4	0	0	1	5
Domestic worker	1	1	0	0	2
Farmer	0	0	1	1	2
Businessmen	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, although by no means wealthy. 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. Their livelihood profiles are evidently very different and complex.

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. It is not self-evident why commonage users want to keep livestock. They may constitute a new agricultural class, or their farming activity may be the sign of desperation and poverty. It may be their first choice for a livelihood, or a fall-back option after everything else has failed. Stock ownership may constitute a new type of agricultural commercialism, or it may simply be a type of insurance policy against a “rainy day”. These are the underlying motivations for the survey. Although the findings are not always definitive, they do provide some trends; and they also provide indications of how similar studies should be methodologically refined in future.

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

**Table 8: 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
<b>Total</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>100</b>

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. The work of Ferguson (1994), on the concept of the 'bovine mystique', suggests that non-commercial motives may be very important for livestock ownership. 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 Group 1-4 schema in Table 5 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.

The survey attempted to explore the extent of commonage users’ commercial motives. In this study, five 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. For example, commercialization is not necessarily conceptually tied to land ownership, nor is it tied to full-time farming. Furthermore, these indicators are somewhat susceptible to influence by extraneous factors, as will be shown below. These nuances could not be explored within the scope of the survey. 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 9: Expenditure on livestock**

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

Table 9 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. A further consideration is that a distinction should be made between “distress sales” and sales in a context of prosperity. This is an issue which should be explored more fully in future research.

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 10 shows, the majority of commonage users had not sold livestock in the previous year:

**Table 10: 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
<b>Total</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>28</b>

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

correlation. 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 whole range of motivations among commonage users, as well as numerous livelihood strategies. An important aspect of an improved commonage policy 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, different sizes of land parcels, different types of extension services, and a range of financial support mechanisms.

### **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 Philippolis, 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 11: Willingness to pay rent for more land**

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

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 findings cannot be accepted as definitive. Farmers’ willingness to pay rentals may differ significantly, and they may well be giving what they consider to be the “right answer”. To some extent, the proof of the pudding will be in the eating, and it is only when farmers are really required to pay rentals, that their willingness will be tested. This suggests that future studies would have to ask more focused and refined questions, to understand what farmers are willing (and able) to pay.

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 are willing to pay rentals, if the problem of "free riding" can be addressed

4. 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 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. It also suggests that, if the dysfunctions of the rental system were removed (such as the “free riding” problem associated with communal rental) can be overcome).

#### **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 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. It is tempting to assume that the farmers who prefer a communal arrangement are those who are survivalists, but this would not necessarily be the case.

However, the effectiveness of the indicator is somewhat undermined by the many management problems which farmers encounter, as reflected in Table 12:

**Table 12: Reasons for wanting to farm individually**

	Number of mentions	Percent
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
<b>Total</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>100.0</b>

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

**Table 13: Preference to own agricultural land**

	Number of mentions	Percent
Yes	25	89.3
No	3	10.7
<b>Total</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Table 14 shows the reasons which commonage users gave for wanting to own their own land:

**Table 14: 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
<b>Total</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>100</b>

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.

It should be noted that there are problems and limitations of relying on hypothetical and attitudinal questions, since answers to these vary with people's perceptions of the likelihood, and implications, of these conditions being realized. Furthermore, respondents may not be fully conversant with the practical and financial challenges associated with land ownership. A more realistic evaluation would also have to take cognisance of farmer's resources, and their ability to use land effectively, as well as different potential sizes and locations of land parcels. As they stand, the findings are fairly abstract. However, they once again suggest two things: The widespread desire to have access to land they can call their own (in whatever sense or scale), and the diversity of people's motivations for wanting such land. Translated into a policy recommendation, this suggests the importance of exit options, and the need for a diversity of such options in practice.

## **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).

But as we have seen from the literature, most analysts do not see a role for municipal commonage in the broader land reform strategy mainly due to the current low rate of exit from the commonage (Hall, 2003). Concurrently, 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.

Although there is some validity in all these arguments, the Philippolis case has shown them to have weaknesses too. We have identified five shortcomings in their arguments. 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 with 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. This does not imply that commonage users have to “graduate” to full-time farmers. Many of them will continue having diversified livelihoods, perhaps in a peri-urban area. However, given the increased chances that individually owned land offers it might be expected that many emergent farmers would spend more time on agriculture than before.

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. It is true, as Anderson and Pienaar (2003) note, that few commonage users have been able to afford to buy land through the LRAD programme. This is extremely unfortunate. Evidence suggests that this is not due to a lack of effort on their part. In 2002-3, the author assisted two commonage users in Philippolis to apply for land subsidies to purchase peri-urban plots, and both were turned down on the grounds that such plots are too small – even though they would have been ideal for part-time farming.

This suggests that the concept of “mixed livelihoods” has not yet entered the lexicon of Free State DLA and DoA officials. Furthermore, the gradualist “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. Land redistribution requires a range of land access options, for it to be meaningful to people with very different ambitions, resources and livelihoods.

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.

## **7. Progress and innovations**

There have recently been some major steps forward in official thinking, even though the peri-urban scenario has not yet been explored.

The first encouraging sign is the new Commonage Manual, drafted by the national office of the Department of Land Affairs. A key component of this manual is that it improves the leasing system, and makes provision for leasing of land by head of livestock, in addition to renting out parcels of land. This is likely to improve payment of fees and maintenance of infrastructure, and reduce overgrazing. The major question will be how this manual will be brought to municipalities’ attention, and how they will be assisted to implement it.

A second intervention is the drafting of a commonage policy for Letsemeng Municipality in the Koffiefontein area of the Free State, and adjoining Kopanong Municipality. This policy was drafted by the Free State Department of Agriculture. It makes provision for three categories of livestock farmers. Category 1 farmers will be operating at the bottom of the scale, and will be new entrants into the commonage system, as well as small-scale subsistence farmers. There is a stipulated maximum number of animals for each farmer (5 cattle, 30 sheep or 30 goats). They may stay on as Category 1 farmers for as

long as they want to, but stock reduction may be required to make room for new entrants. The municipality will assist with the provision of bulls and rams, with drought relief applications, and with the control of animal diseases. At least 50% of commonage land will be set aside for Category 1 farmers.

Category 2 farmers will share a piece of land with a maximum of four other farmers. The maximum number of animals is 15 cattle or 90 sheep or goats. A farmer can remain in this category for a maximum of five years, and he or she will then be required to move to Category 3.

Category 3 farmers are each allocated their own rented piece of land. The maximum number of animals a farmer can have is 30 cattle, 180 sheep, or 180 goats. A farmer will be allowed to farm as a Category 3 farmer for a maximum period of three years, and then he or she must apply for an LRAD grant to buy a piece of land. The Department of Agriculture will assist in the application.

This policy is a major step forward, because it creates a *commonage system*, which functions for clearly defined purposes – subsistence and the creation of new commercial farmers. It also shows that the two purposes are compatible, if managed appropriately.

These innovations now need to be refined further, to bring on board the concept of peri-urban development and mixed livelihoods.

## 8. 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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