

Expansion of Global Urbanization: Investigating Land Markets, Land Values, and the Automatic Identification of Subdivided Land

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SUMMARY

This paper builds on the 2024 report of the Land Tenure Committee—co-chaired by the French Development Agency and the Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs—which examines land-use change in the Global South under rapid urbanization. Urban expansion now extends far beyond builtup areas, as rural land is subdivided into small plots that leave agriculture but remain often undeveloped—so-called “latent urban lands.” These plots represent a critical yet largely overlooked stage in contemporary urban growth.

Combining spatial analysis and AI-based plot detection (led by IGN–France International) with ethnographic fieldwork and cadastral and land registry analysis (led by IRD – the French National Research Institute for Sustainable Development), the study both qualifies and quantifies this phenomenon. Findings show that conventional estimates of urbanization significantly underestimate the scale of residential land conversion. Fallow plots signal not only agricultural decline but also substantial latent housing potential. Increasingly, land is acquired not only for construction but also as a means to store value, protect capital, and secure access to

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finance.

Recognizing the role of latent urban land is essential for anticipating trajectories of urban growth and informing more sustainable planning and land governance strategies.

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