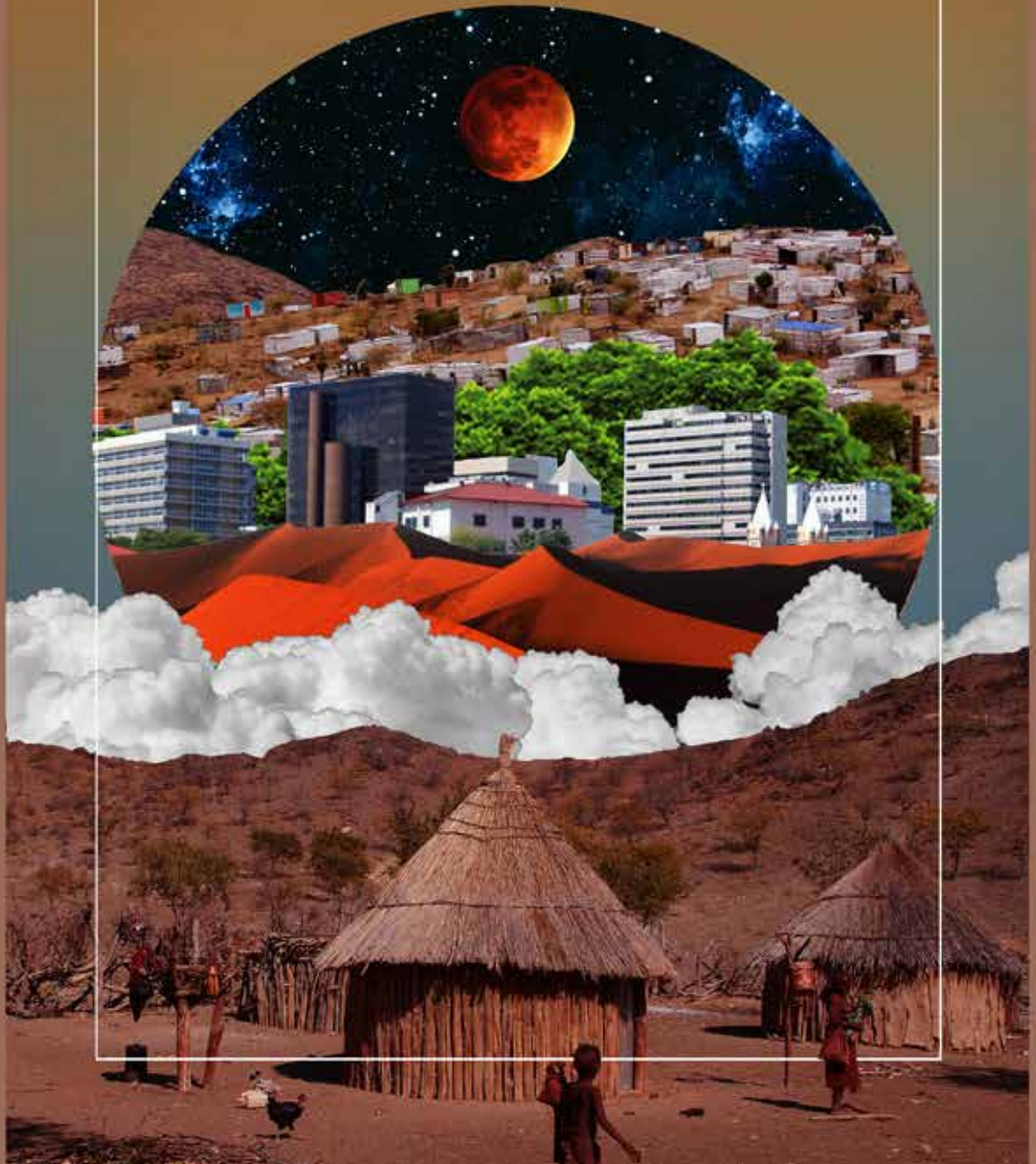


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## Namibia's Housing Crisis in Perspective



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# **Namibia's Housing Crisis in Perspective**

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# Afterthought - Nexus between Land and Housing

*Helen Vale*

This first issue of NJSJ has housing as its focus of discussion. However, since land and housing are inextricably linked (you cannot have a house without land to put it on), it is necessary to give some key facts about the Final Report of the Commission of Inquiry into Claims of Ancestral Land Rights which was released into the public domain on April 21, 2021 and is a 780-page document, now available on the website of the Office of the Prime Minister (<https://opm.gov.na>).

## Background to the Establishment of this Commission

Namibia was subjected to colonial rule from 1884 to 1990. This long legacy bequeathed to an independent Namibia many challenges, of which the skewed land distribution that was in favour of a white minority population, has dominated the post-independence public and policy discourse on land.

Namibia is about 82 million hectares in size and there are three main forms of land ownership - freehold commercial land, non-freehold communal land and state land. At independence in 1990 44% of the total land area was made up

of freehold agricultural (commercial) land which was predominately owned by about 4,200 whites who made up less than 0.26% of the total population, while 40% consisted of non-freehold commercial land that was mostly occupied by the 92% of the population, mainly black Namibians. The remaining 16% constituted state land (government commercial farms, national parks, forests, mining areas, research stations and townlands).

It is against this background that the Namibian Government had convened two historic national land conferences in 1991 and 2018 with the aim of finding solutions to the land question and on 15 March 2019 Dr H.G. Geingob, President of the Republic of Namibia, established a Commission of Inquiry into Claims of Ancestral Land Rights and Restitution (above three paragraphs are extracted from the Executive Summary to the Report of this Commission of Inquiry).

## Composition of the Commission and some Findings

The Commission consisted of High Court Judge Shafimuna Ueitele as

Chairperson and 15 experienced Commissioners and they visited 121 constituencies over 8 weeks, receiving both written submissions and oral testimonies. 8,351 people appeared before the Commission. When handing over the Commission's Report to the President in 24 July 2020, Judge Ueitele stressed that:

*'We wish to echo the voices of the many deponents who have informed us that addressing the land question systematically to achieve the intended objectives and results is very urgent and that it is a matter of social justice, restoration of human dignity and maintenance of peace and stability in Namibia.'*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CCwIDuZsJB0>

The Report is divided into 8 chapters: Chapter 1 sets out the background, terms of reference and principles adopted; Chapter 2 looks at the multi-pronged methodological approach used; Chapters 3 and 4 contains summaries of commissioned historical and legal studies; Chapter 5 gives an overview of Namibia's socio-developmental, economic, agro-ecological and land data; Chapter 6 has exemplars of the many written and oral testimonies; Chapter 7 reviews matters regarded as urgent, while Chapter 8 consists of discussion, findings and recommendations. Whilst the focus mainly was on agricultural land and

land in the rural areas, urban land was mentioned occasionally.

One important general finding in the report is that:

*'All land in the country, it appears, is committed such that, based on current legislation and data on land use patterns, there is little (if any) unallocated alternative land in communal, commercial and urban areas for allocation/ resettling landless people as well as those to be repatriated from the diaspora. Alternative land may only become available through land use re-allocation' (8.4.4.1 (c))*

One matter that was listed under matters requiring urgent intervention in chapter 7 was that of the need for urban land rights for the displaced and landless. The precarious situation of urban dwellers who had been dumped and left to fend of themselves was highlighted, whether they were coming from land dispossessed communities or those evicted from commercial farms. Such people urgently need access to urban land and tenure security.

## **My Conclusion**

It is ironic that Namibia is marketed as the land of vast open spaces, yet its people are scrambling for dwellings of their own that they can call home.

In many cases, land has been deliberately alienated from its historical

or political context and developed as an economic asset. The discourse around land is based on its identification with possession and ownership on the one hand and the need for a sense of belonging and safety on the other (adapted from words by Elize van Huyssteen, temporary curator, in her overview of the recent art exhibition *Landscapes* which ran from 20 May 2020 to 31 January 2021, at the National Gallery of Namibia).

It is vital to remember that many Namibian cultures view land as sacred and it is linked closely to the concepts of home, security and belonging; hence the universal wish for one's own home and adequate housing (the latter being a right acknowledged by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1945). In Namibia, as in most countries, there exists a dire need for decent housing and a place to call home.