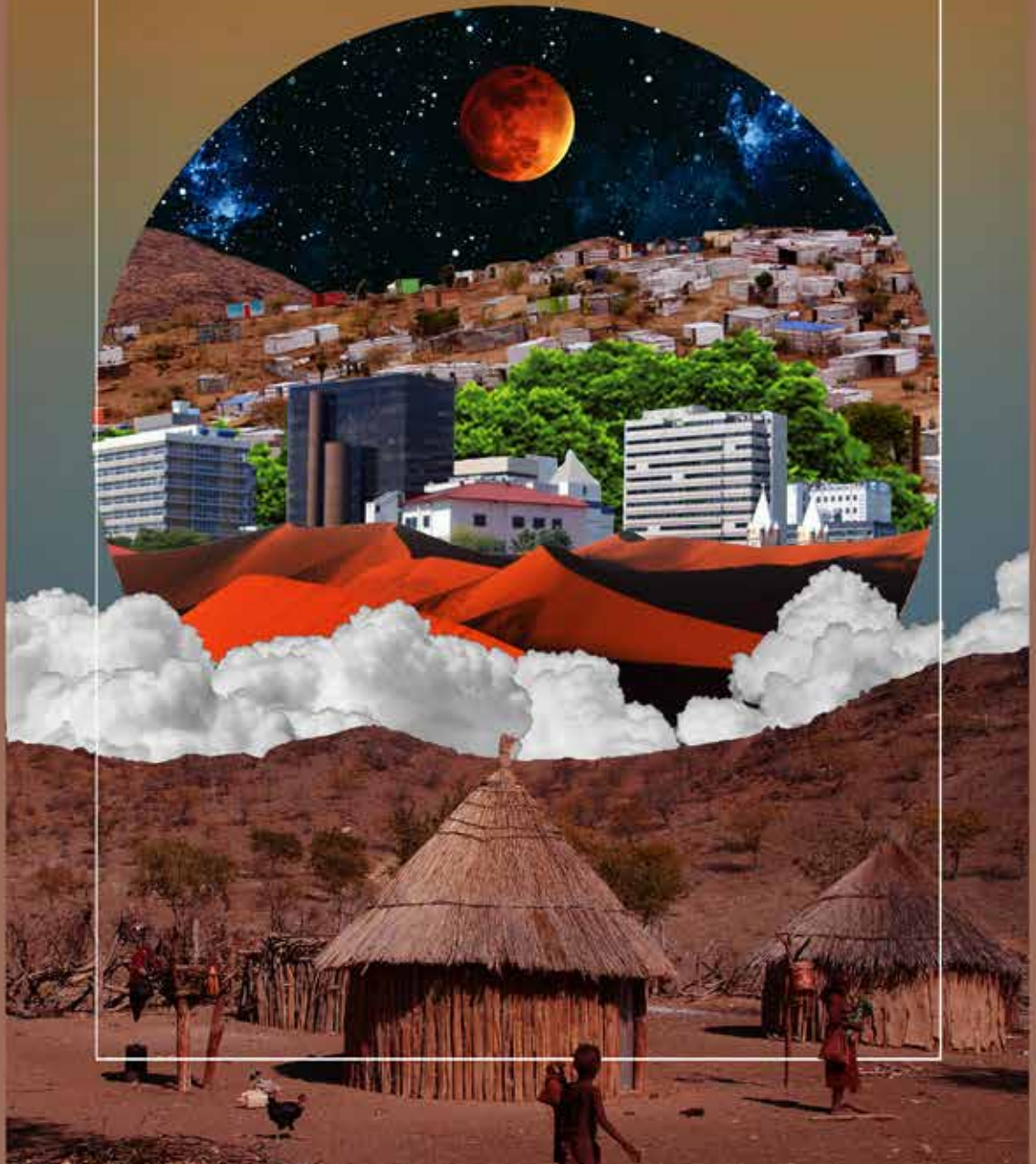




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Namibia's Housing Crisis in Perspective



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Opinion Piece 1: Is Social Housing Possible?

Shaun Whittaker, Harry Boesak and Mitchell Van Wyk

According to the former deputy minister of urban and rural development, Derek Klazen, Namibia's housing backlog stands at 300,000 units currently. This is a huge number if it is considered that this mineral-rich country has a population of only two and a half million and has had 30 years of neo-colonialism. In other words, the housing crisis has only worsened during the past three decades under Swapo rule and the vast majority of Namibians do not live in decent housing. Therefore,

in housing the Swapo government has been a massive failure.

The former deputy minister also suggested that N\$76 billion would be required for land servicing and housing construction (The Namibian, 21 September 2020, pg. 9). This is undoubtedly a significant sum of money but it should be placed in context. Firstly, the Namibian government functions on neoliberal assumptions, i.e., that the building



Photo: Guillermo Delgado

material would have to be purchased at current prices from the private sector and that the profit motive would have to be respected. It also assumes that housing is not a social right and that the commercial banks and the self-styled (capitalist) developers should be responsible for housing. No wonder the housing crisis only became worse over the years! For the past 30 years, the Namibian government managed to build only 35 000 houses, which is a tremendous disgrace!

The neoliberal model has meant that the super-rich do not pay taxes and therefore the Namibian government – who agreed to this predatory framework at political independence – was compelled to shift costs onto ordinary citizens. This meant that land, water, electricity and so forth became extremely expensive. In addition, the supposed private sector – driven by greed and therefore unproductive – became central to the supply of housing. The financial sector and the construction and building material companies became increasingly fabulously wealthy, while pushing most of the population further and further into debt and poverty. Land servicing – which was never an issue with the social democratic model that prevailed during the horrendous years of colonialism – suddenly became a supposedly complicated and expensive issue. This is just part of the neoliberal smokescreen.

Moreover, the estimate of the housing backlog does not include the large number of housing units in the country left empty and abandoned because of inflated pricing and large numbers of people steadily leaving the country owing to the financial crisis of the past few years. If this was considered, the backlog would be greatly reduced.

The political elite undoubtedly had skewed priorities in building a palace-like state house, too many government buildings and unnecessary roads. The government has also maintained a huge and secret military budget during thirty years of peace – a military budget that would easily have covered the costs for a mass housing project. Other noteworthy options to provide social housing could have been a wealth tax or money from the government pension fund. But this was not to be due to the vanity and avarice of a political elite that is a burden to the country.

This shows that the former deputy minister was simply being disingenuous when he reasoned that one of the main causes of the housing crisis is that people lack the financial means to acquire housing. To not explain the context of the organic social crisis – which generated tremendous unemployment and slave-like wages – is to be dishonest and to not take political responsibility for the misery created by the Namibian state – which is ultimately merely an instrument of capital. And then Klazen

even has the audacity to state that the government should pursue smart partnerships with the private sector. In other words, the massive failure will continue but the government will still follow the same profit-driven framework which is dominated by an uncaring political and economic elite in Namibia. The former deputy minister is clearly mistaken in thinking that the so-called private sector has the solution to the housing crisis when it is precisely the financialisation and commodification of this sector that gave rise to the catastrophe.

Similarly, to refer to inadequate budget allocations is an understatement as this political elite is responsible for the budget and are certainly not helpless victims in the budgetary process. It was a conscious decision of the *political elite* to focus on state building and to put the needs of the Namibian people last. They are clearly incapable of nation building, which in the final analysis includes ensuring social equality at all levels.

If anything, the callousness of the political elite towards the nation is obvious. For example, how on earth can we focus on upgrading informal settlements instead of constructing proper housing? To add insult to injury, the government aims to upgrade a mere 10 informal settlements with the 2020/21 budget, although there are 113 informal settlements throughout the country.

Likewise, the government intends to construct only 5 000 houses in that budget, but usually this figure does not even reach its low-level goals. There are an estimated 228 000 shacks in the country, which excludes those Namibians living in backyards and overcrowded housing units. More than 94 percent of the Namibian people live in inadequate housing. What a terrible shame! It would undoubtedly be a considerable task to move all informal settlements to well-located places, but the government owns enough land for housing and a five-year plan could achieve this. It was mainly the political will that was lacking from the neo-colonial elite from the start. And the decongestion of informal settlements is clearly not a solution as the target ought to be to get rid of all such settlements and to provide decent housing to our people. Furthermore, if rent control and unoccupied housing units or buildings are considered, the nation would certainly need much less newly constructed housing. So, for the left wing, there is huge potential to mobilise the working people around housing.

After mass mobilisation by the trade union movement in Uruguay in the 1960s, that country eventually passed progressive legislation around social housing. There is much to learn for the Namibian left wing from that country. The Law of Housing of Uruguay is based on the theory of human dignity, and recognises housing as a social right.

Social housing units there were never part of the real estate market that was driven by the 'private' sector. If anything, the involvement of collectives was legally recognised by the progressive legislation, as well as the right of working people to collective property ownership. Principles of mutual aid and democratic management were similarly accepted. The motto of the Uruguayan housing cooperatives movement was: no more houses without people, no more people without houses.

Following the example of Uruguay, Brazil set up a National Housing Bank to make financing housing for lower income people possible. The Institute for Applied Economic Research (2016) in Brazil recommended five features that should be overcome in informal settlements: no access to drinking water, no basic sanitation, overcrowded or insufficient housing space, non-durable housing structures and unsafe security of tenure for occupants. However, in Namibia a sixth feature is crucial, i.e., energy inefficiency.

It is high time for the Namibian nation to move beyond the neo-liberal framework that commodifies the social rights of people. It is indeed crucial to affirm housing as a social right and to counter the destructive activities in this essential sphere. The profit motive should simply be removed from social rights. On a practical level, it is vital – instead of profit-driven developers – to

rather set up grassroots-based housing collectives throughout the country which could drive the construction of such mass housing projects. It goes without saying that such housing collectives ought to be democratically managed and should be independent from political parties. Housing units constructed by these co-ops would remain the joint properties of the grassroots organisations and would be able to be transferred to the descendants of the owners as long as they also become members of the collectives.

What is required is an ambitious housing construction project that could provide jobs and training opportunities for the enormous number of unemployed in Namibia. It could present the nation with a real opportunity to train quality artisans, but also to form collectives that could be an example in other crucial areas such as food and clothing production. This could be combined with a solar energy project that should assist with the creation of energy efficient housing units that would remain cool in the scorching Namibian heat. It would generally also be necessary to construct decent houses with reasonable living space for every person. Housing units, such as those set up in Walvis Bay during the Housingrot of the Pohamba administration, with only one outside door or no inside toilet, are simply undignified and unacceptable.

Similarly, the country has sufficient underground water to supply every household in the nation with water, and water cooperatives could make this a reality. We should resist any attempt to privatise our underground aquifers.? Indeed, let us also form collectives for sanitation and clean neighbourhoods, and every other important area of

life. The best option is to mobilise the working people from below so that they themselves take responsibility for all their needs. We should be our own liberators. The self-reliance of the working people should make them realise that, in the end, social housing would only be truly possible in a post-capitalist Namibia.