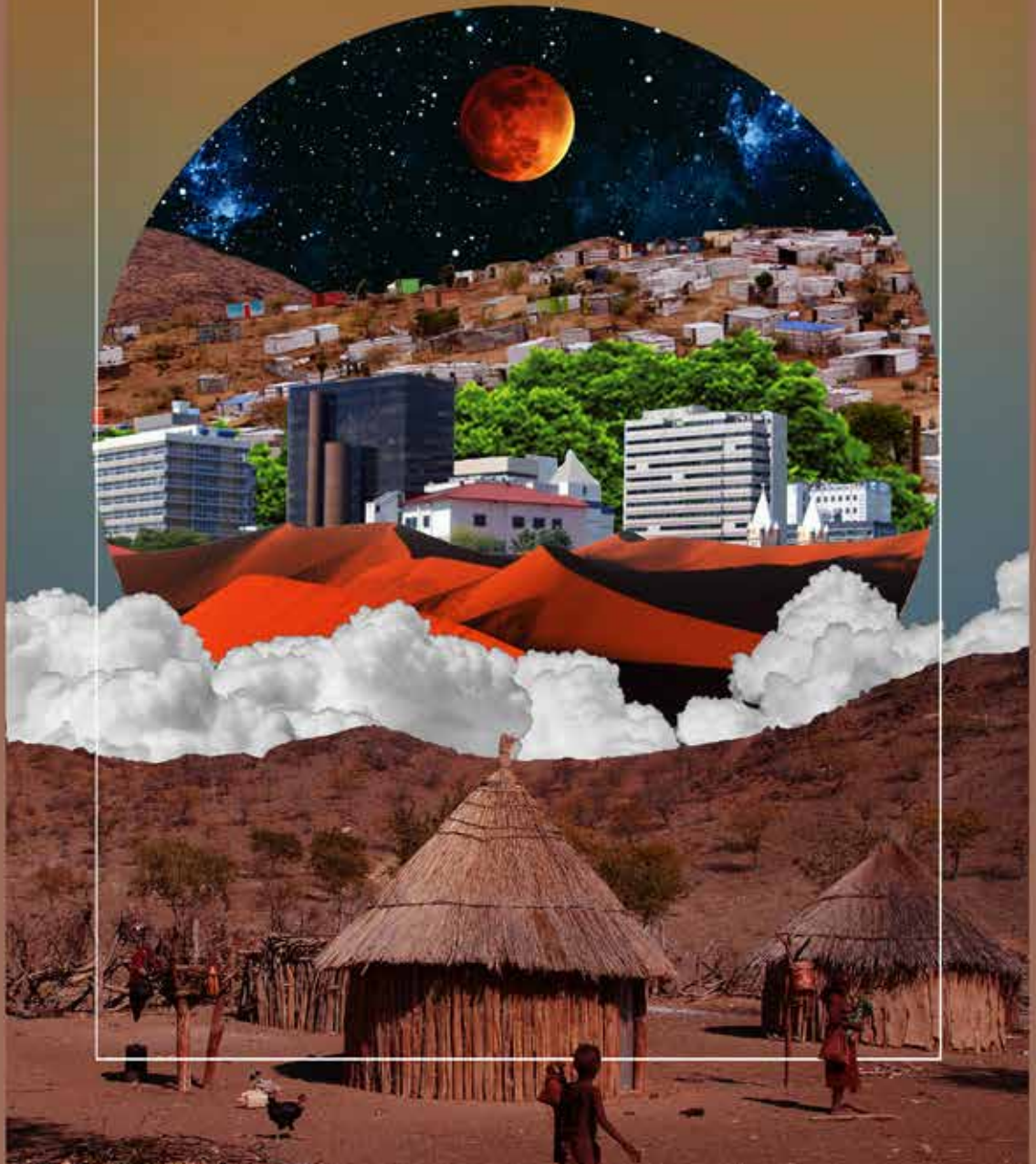


Namibian  
Journal  
of Social  
Justice

## Namibia's Housing Crisis in Perspective



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Publishers: Economic and Social Justice Trust

Cover design: Titus Shitaatala

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ISSN: 2026-8882

Printed by  
John Meinert Printing (Pty) Ltd  
P.O. Box 5688  
Windhoek/Namibia  
[info@johnmeinert.com](mailto:info@johnmeinert.com)

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

Volume 1,

July 2021



**Namibian  
Journal  
of Social  
Justice**

[www.namsocialjustice.org](http://www.namsocialjustice.org)

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## **Opinion Piece 2:** **The Namibian Housing Conundrum: Ambiguities and Contradictions**

*Toivo Ndjebela*

A large proportion of the urban population in developing countries lives in informal settlements due largely to rapid population growth and widespread poverty. In Namibia, this reality was accelerated by the abolition of the contract labour system, which previously prevented movement to urban centres unless the migrant had secured a job in such cities in advance.

The rapid urbanisation process, exacerbated in part by the attainment of independence in 1990, has led many Namibians to shift from rural to an urban areas in search of a better life that independence itself promised to usher in. This trend caught both legislation and institutions off-guard.



*Photo: Guillermo Delgado*

The new and largely small Namibian economy was characterised by unstable jobs and low wages, which robbed many economic immigrants ability to afford formal housing. Informal settlements are more the norm than the exception in many cities of developing countries (Baross, 1990), with the majority of the inhabitants living in informal areas.

The increasing population in informal areas necessitated changes in policy to deal with these settlements. In dealing with the spiralling growth of informal settlements, nations embarked on two major alternatives. Some countries sought formal alternatives through subsidised social housing and, later, site-and-service projects. Other nations accepted informal settlements as part of the housing solution, instead of considering it a problem (Payne, 2002). Payne observed two important aspects: legality (securing of land and housing tenure) and physical consolidation (dwelling and infrastructure development).

### **Accepting Informal Housing as Inevitable Reality**

While in many countries' physical upgrading in informal settlement has been practised through the installation of infrastructure, it is sometimes argued (Werlin, 1999) that without land titles physical improvement would not be sustainable. In Namibia, for example, the demolition of illegal structures in

informal areas is a regular occurrence, meaning therefore that putting up such structures, or improving the existing ones, could be a waste of resources since they could later be bulldozed down by municipal authorities.

In the 2017 court case of Likuwa vs the Municipal Council of the City of Windhoek (High Court of Namibia, 2017), the City of Windhoek, which ordered its municipal police to demolish illegally-erected shacks belonging to 16 residents of Otjomuise area of Windhoek, the municipality argued that by law it was unable to allow squatters to set up homes without its approval.

The municipality pointed to the Local Authorities Act of 1992, which mandates it to manage land situated within its area of jurisdiction and to deliver basic services for the benefit of the inhabitants within its jurisdiction. The Council is, as such, the owner of the land on which shacks were erected illegally.

Also, lack of land tenure in informal settlements makes it difficult to access mortgages to invest in improving such dwellings. Without State approval to own urban land, people in informal settlements do not own land titles, which are a widely accepted tool throughout the world to secure collateral for loans.

In Peru, for example, the growth of informal settlements in Lima and other cities in the country picked up significantly in the 1940s. This was a result of the increase in rural-urban migration, especially in Lima where the city population grew from 600 000 people in the 1940s to 7 million in the early 2000s (Payne, 2002). This influx overwhelmed government to the extent that authorities could no longer prevent migrants moving to cities.

### **From Lima to Windhoek**

Subsequently, authorities started to get involved in the provision of services and tenure to such settlements – in part to gain political support. The Peruvians, in accepting informal settlements as an inevitable reality, promulgated Law 13517 (Payne, 2002), which stated that informal areas should be legally integrated into formal methods of urban development.

The law gave individual property titles and the right to improve existing informal structures, amongst others. Based on World Bank population estimates and urban ratios from the United Nations World Urbanization Prospects, Namibia's urban population stood at 46% in 2016, with an urban growth rate of 4.6% per annum (growth rate of rural population: 0.6 percent).

The major factor influencing the urbanisation in Namibia is rural-to-urban migration, mainly by young

people in search of better social and economic opportunities. However, many such new arrivals join others in setting up new informal structures in cities, without the benefit of land tenure rights.

Those living in informal settlements have, to some extent, access to land but not security of tenure because many of them live on invaded municipal land and can therefore not use the land on which they live to raise capital. The then mayor of Windhoek Muesee Kazapua (The Patriot, 2016) remarked that the situation could be improved if government operationalised the Flexible Land Tenure Act, which is not yet operational pending a pilot project to test its effectiveness.

The Act was formulated to guarantee security of tenure to those living in informal settlements. The 2016 estimates indicate that 116 000 of the 325 858 Windhoek residents lived in informal settlements. Residents living in informal settlements across Windhoek were expected to increase to 148 000 by 2020 (The Patriot, 2016). The migration report by the Namibian Ministry of Home Affairs indicated that by 2030, 60% of the country's population will live in urban areas (New Era, 2015).

It is sometimes argued that all households are contributors to the city economy, whether formally employed or not. Payne (2002) argues that the



wealth of any city is built from every single house and residence - be it a villa employing dozens, a cluster house, a multi-storey flat, a humble structure of mud, cardboard or plastic sheets with perhaps a corrugated iron roof - all of which form a continuum in the placement of people in the urban context, and thus all forms of housing have the potential to be economically active.

After all, cities may only provide services to residents if their revenue collection regime covers all households in the city - whether formal or informal - so that municipalities may continue providing basic amenities to all communities within their municipal boundaries, including those that may have erected their shacks without municipal approval.

## Conclusion

The common denominators of informal settlements are poverty and social exclusion. These gave rise to the rest of the challenges in these areas. Policies aimed at alleviating poverty in these dwellings must be designed specifically to accommodate these realities and address them decisively.

Answers to the Namibian housing question lie in a policy shift. The current set of laws has not answered the country's challenges - hence the need to approach matters differently. The Flexible Land Tenure Act, if

implemented to the letter and within the spirit of its establishment, could be a game-changer for Namibia. This is particularly so if it is applied with an admission that informal settlements are here to stay and that they simply need to have an infusion of dignity through provision of basic amenities and tenure rights.

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