



Epic housing crisis

Land key to abolish shack homes

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A new Namibian book on the explosive growth of informal settlements in Namibia warns that unless serious efforts and a shift in strategies are urgently undertaken to provide affordable urban homes, more than 500 000 shacks will exist by 2030 that will house around two million people.

The authors of the just-released "Informal Settlements in Namibia: Their Nature and Growth", John Mendelsohn and Beat Weber, who studied the subject for more than a year, argue that in order to prevent around half of the country's population living in shacks within 13 years, affordable land, instead of houses, are key.

"To address the housing crisis of Namibia's low-income urban residents, the focus should shift from the provision of housing towards the provision of affordable land."

One of seven detailed recommendations the book urges is that "government and local authorities should supply land with a minimum of cost and at maximum speed."

The construction of houses should be in the hands of the residents, and they should be "allowed to build at their own pace, with a minimum of obstacles and a maximum of encouragement".

The authors say that the provision of low-cost urban land can be done on a cost recovery basis, as detailed in the book, and that this would attract the private sector to support these initiatives.

In 1991, 86% of Namibia's homes were formal brick houses, compared to 12% shacks. In 2001, 77% of homes were formal brick while 21% were shacks. The 2011 figures showed that shacks had increased to 32%, with formal brick homes reduced to 32% of all houses in Namibia.

By 2023, it is estimated that urban shacks will outnumber all rural houses, and all formal urban brick houses by 2025, making shacks, at the current expansion rate, the predominant housing type by that year, in Namibia.

Change of ideas

The authors also list two of the reasons the national housing programmes to date have had little impact on stemming informal settlement growth.

These programmes "tend to focus on the provision of finished houses at prices that are unaffordable for most low-income residents, and the scale of the national housing programmes has been insufficient to effectively address the demand for land and housing by low-income migrants."

It is estimated that around 12 000 shacks are built annually in Namibia, and that urban growth overall is mainly fuelled by the rapid expansion of informal settlements.

The authors warn that the "economic, social and environmental costs of informal growth and unplanned urban development are huge for Namibia as a country and as a society."



(<https://d3rp5jatom3eyn.cloudfront.net/assets/housing-crisis2017-11-160.jpg>)

SERIOUS CONCERNS: Informal settlements are expanding at a rapid pace, and urgent intervention is needed. PHOTO: HELGE DENKER

The “new forms of poverty and inequality” experienced by the residents of these informal urban settlements “will be entrenched over generations to come if towns fail to develop in ways that facilitate the transition from rural to urban society.”

It is estimated that in 2011, almost 380 000 urban (excluding rural) residents had no access to toilet facilities. Mendelsohn estimated that by now that figure could be at 600 000.

In everyone's interest

Providing access to land for homes “provides one of the very basic conditions for households to build security investments, become an integral part of the formal town and contribute to its economic base and public funds,” the authors found.

Mendelsohn said it is in the interest of local authorities, some of which he says have begun implementing pre-emptive steps to transform informal areas into formal areas such as Otjiwarongo, to tackle the issue, even if it is step by step.

“If we calculate the losses of money of all those people living in informal settlements, and not contributing to rates and taxes, the amounts are staggering.”

He said most informal settlements receive such a large influx because the formal housing market does not provide affordable options.

The book describes how people from impoverished rural areas, if provided with homes in urban areas that “provide them with confidence, services, security and long-term outlooks, can be economically productive. The integration of low-income residents into the formal land market will also raise public funds from rates and taxes for the betterment of all.”

Poverty, in itself, has little to do with families living in shacks, and instead, implementing pre-emptive town planning based on the in-migration rates, and making affordable land available, could slow down, and eventually, stop the need for shacks.

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