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Namibia's emerging urban-class struggle

# A radical introduction to Namibia's unequal territory

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**Namibia is the least populated country in the planet, and yet one often hears among working class and increasingly middle class groups that one of the biggest challenges in the country is 'the land issue'. Debates on the land issue after Namibia's independence in 1990 revolved solely around farmland redistribution, but today they are mainly concerned with the issue of land within towns and cities, where almost half of the population lives.**

Currently almost a third of the population lives in so-called 'informal settlements' (SDFN, 2009) and half the population has only 'the bush' for sanitation purposes (NSA, 2012a). Yet, Namibia is considered to be a peaceful, prosperous, 'upper middle income' country (New Era, 2011). Inequality is, after all, a relationship between the empowered and the dispossessed.

Namibia contains extreme inequalities that often place it on the list of unequal countries, just next to South Africa. If one takes Gini coefficient as a measure, Namibia ranks as the third most unequal country in the world with an index of 63.9, followed by South Africa with an index of 63.1 (World Bank, n.d.). This inequality can be clearly seen in the country.

Namibia, like South Africa, is also one of the few countries in Sub-Saharan Africa with a significant proportion of descendants of European colonial settlers. Most of the country consists of protected areas (for nature preservation or diamond exploration) or private freehold farms owned largely by a minority of mainly white farmers.

Today most citizens still live in so-called 'communal areas' in the northern regions bordering with Angola. Only a small portion of the territory consists of towns and cities, which follow the apartheid structure, with privileged central areas for wealthier whites and underprivileged peripheral areas for blacks.

This structure, which served the purposes of apartheid, today conveniently benefits the 'property market' promoted by real estate agents and banks. In the three main municipalities in central Namibia, there are no actually-existing 'mixed-income' neighbourhoods, which in Namibia has racial implications. Given these conditions, it could be argued that contemporary liberation struggles will emerge mainly within towns and cities.

## Namibia's crisis building urbanization

Namibia's urban land crisis is a result of free market logic left to regulate the provision of land and housing for the general population. An 'entry level house' in Namibia currently costs about R700 000, which only 10 per cent of the population can access. House price increases have averaged about 20 per cent annually over the last ten years. Today, house price increases in Namibia are the second highest in the world, just after Dubai, according to a report in *Namib Times*.

If one was fortunate enough to have purchased a house for R300 000 in 2007, one would be able to sell it today for R900 000. Property is a preferred method of investing for those able to access finance, as it is in many parts of the world. In Namibia, this is a small minority.

To qualify for the median house price in central areas, one would need to earn a minimum of R23 000 per month,

while almost 70 per cent of those considered to be employed earn less than R4 000 per month (NSA, 2012b). As in South Africa, the definition of 'employed' is unconvincing, including for example having spent an hour in the last seven days fetching water for your household.

National unemployment stood at 51 per cent in 2008, but after the National Statistics Agency revised its method, this figure decreased to 27 per cent in 2012. Unemployment after this 'recalibration' is nevertheless on the increase.

During the years when the Labour Resource and Research Institute (LaRRI) conducted wage bargaining reports (2004 - 2009), workers' annual real wages' increased on average by 1.8 per cent (LaRRI, 2008). Real wages are wage increases after inflation, which in Namibia has averaged 8 per cent annually in the last ten years, according to *Trading Economics*.

Namibia is also a very expensive place to live, since its territory is extremely arid and it has only a small industrial base that makes it highly dependent on imports, mainly from South Africa. The cost of living in Windhoek, the capital, is reportedly 35 per cent more expensive than Cape Town, while the purchasing power of Windhoekers is 58 per cent lower than that of the Capetonians, according to *The Namibian*.

The many narratives that aim at providing explanations for this urban and social crisis usually claim inefficiencies in the system. In the case of housing, one reason given is that supply is too low. Indeed, the state-owned enterprise in charge of housing has been delivering an average of 600 houses annually against a backlog of 185,000 units.

Another reason often advanced is that insufficient land is available. Municipalities are responsible for servicing land and some have either little budgets or operate on a cost-recovery basis. Moreover, professional fees for seemingly necessary consultancies on spatial development – land surveyors, planners, engineers – are high. Some consultants charge between 50 to 100 times the highest sectoral minimum wage in the country. Most of the country's technology and materials are imported, which adds to costs in every sector.

However, as urbanist Peter Marcuse once famously said: 'Homelessness exists not because the system is not working, but because this is the way the system works'. Powerful interests are vested in 'the property market' (read: land and housing). As usually happens during crises, this has different effects for different income groups.

A house price increase means a (fictitious) profit for the homeowner that diminishes the non-homeowner's prospects of buying a house. An increase in rent means a higher (again, also fictitious) profit for landlords, while to the tenant it means less disposable income and/or eviction. In Namibia, rental regulations are weak, and landlords can act as rentiers without any obligation to maintain the property.

Housing and land are an arena for intense class struggle. The question is whether this has been already activated as such. A review of a recent land protest and its background may show that this is in fact currently taking place.

## The margin for potential urban civic struggle

In a recent case, a saga involving blatant favouritism on the part of the municipality of Windhoek has been exposed. Reportedly, prime land was given away cheaply to TV stars, politicians, and family members of the political elite. At the same time, however, evictions and threats to informal settlers have taken place, enforced by elite beneficiaries of the land-grab, according to *Namibian Sun*.

Recently, a 'land invasion' led by the popular ruling party (SWAPO) youth league spokesperson put 'urban' land

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in the centre of the media and public debate. The 'land invasion' took place in a middle upper income area, to enforce 'affirmative repositioning'. The youth leader resigned from his position as spokesperson shortly before he was expelled from the party, even though it soon emerged that his expulsion was against the procedures of the party. This occurred only three weeks before elections, when international observers and media would be watching the situation particularly closely.

The 'land invasion' initially drew support from dissident trade union leaders, as well as members of the Shackdwellers' Federation of Namibia (SDFN). The dissident youth leader called for a demonstration in front of the City of Windhoek's municipal offices. However, no labour organisations appear to have openly supported this action, and the SDFN withdrew its intention to participate a day before.

The demonstration took place on Thursday, November 20, and it attracted about 2 000 people. Some 14 000 applications for land were delivered to the municipal offices, according to *Namibia Sun*. By any measure, this was one of the largest public demonstrations in recent times in Namibia. To put it in perspective, only about 100 people marched to parliament in August this year when about 40 changes to the constitution were single-handedly passed without public consultation.

Why now? The ruling party will certainly secure around 75 per cent of the votes in these November elections, and the other parties are still too small to represent any significant threat. However, recent developments in South Africa, such as the expulsion of NUMSA from COSATU, which has eroded the cohesion of the tri-partite alliance that keeps the ANC in power, along with the rise of the EFF, might be factors that the so-called dissident youth leaders have taken into account.

The demonstration targeted the lack of land and corruption among the political elite, but no specific claims have been made against the ruling party. Moreover, the main leader behind these demonstrations is effectively still a member of the ruling party and therefore a supporter of its presidential candidate.

It must be said that the demonstration was peaceful. The municipality ensured that the applications were received, issued a receipt for each one, and even set a deadline for formal replies to the applications. But it remains to be seen whether the initiators will follow up on this and other socially necessary struggles. One question is whether this move was only a strategic move on the part of the elite to consolidate its power.

The fact remains that the possibility of a united protest on urban land issues involving the youth, the unemployed, trade unions and self-help groups was made manifest. The demonstration may have been a sign of things to come. Housing and land will continue to be a divisive issue. The recent launch of the National Mass Housing Program (the 'largest development program since independence', according to its promoters) would have been an excellent opportunity to ameliorate this crisis, but its market-based, conservative approach and erratic undertakings have rendered the project largely unpopular.

The process has mainly benefited middlemen, while rendering housing inaccessible for the working class. The construction of a 36m<sup>2</sup> house costs R238 800 or about R6 600 per m<sup>2</sup>. Government will have to subsidise more than half of this cost, but even the ministry of finance is weary of disbursing funds in view of the money-making nature of the scheme.

Cronyism in the tender process has been widely reported to favour family members of high-ranking politicians. These include the daughter of the president, who reportedly was not even paying the minimum wage to the construction workers hired by her company, according to *Namibian Sun*. (At R13 per hour, the construction sector is the highest sectoral minimum wage in the country.)

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Such schemes might ultimately trigger the political dissent necessary to activate a contemporary liberation struggle. It may still be premature, but shifting ground at the regional and planetary levels might render such speculations timely.