Doing research on socio-spatial development in Namibia, 25.9.2019

Integrated Land Management Institute, Namibia University of Science and Technology

Presentation by **Lalli Metsola**, University of Helsinki, Finland

What do claims over land, housing and basic services tell us about Namibian urbanity, citizenship and society?

As we know, cities are growing fast throughout Africa and Namibia is no exception. This is driven both by rural-urban migration and population growth that is projected to continue through most of this century. Climate change, with the likely increase of extreme weather conditions will probably push urbanization even further, as reliance on rain-fed agriculture might become even more unstable than it is already.

My current research deals with claims related to urban land, housing and basic services in and around Windhoek and Gaborone, the capital cities of Namibia and Botswana. The focus is on residents who live in various degrees of precarity, and specifically on what kinds of claims they make, how they articulate those claims and how such concrete claims reflect and construct relationships between citizens and authorities. I am asking what forms of everyday governance and institutional frameworks are involved and further constructed through such interactions?

I am an anthropologist, not an architect or planner, so I approach these issues mainly as a window into understanding Namibian social and political relations. However, I will try here to connect these with practical questions and solutions for the sake of today's audience and discussion.

Three starting points or premises:

1- Claims concerning land, housing and services are quite concrete, yet they are not merely about material assets. When people are talking about and acting upon these practical matters, they also enunciate and mobilize moral arguments and ideals. Therefore, even though we are talking about concrete issues we are also talking about citizenship and justice, about who is a recognized full member of the nation or the state.

2- Use of urban land is never a mere technical issue. It is intimately tied with economic, social and political forces. Urbanization drives new pressures on land uses, generates new social and spatial forms and leads to desires to capture rising land rents. This makes those in position to make decisions concerning land use both extremely powerful and vulnerable to particular interests.

3- It has been proven many times in history that societal change does not usually happen out of the goodwill of those in power but takes various forms of pressure from below. Considering the magnitude of the crisis of decent standards of living in Namibia, I find Namibians generally surprisingly polite towards those with the power to influence these issues. People might criticize, even heavily, but at the same time, they still tend to expect 'the government' to eventually solve the problems. I find this intriguing and worth examining. And what will happen to this tendency in the future?

After these premilinary points, let me now present a few findings and observations concerning current Namibian urban realities.

A key finding so far has been that the current reality is one where many people are living in a prolonged situation of precarity, with slow gradual improvements to their situation. For these improvements, they depend on the City and other immediate authorities. This makes them dependent on the decisions of these authorities. Such dependence is dual – it makes the residents vulnerable and encourages loyalty to the structures on which they depend. On the other hand, such dependence can also be seen as an investment, as an effort to construct meaningful relationships and claims towards those with power to offer solutions. In this way, the current residential patterns are intimately linked with political structures.

As many Southern Africa specialists have argued, there is in the region quite a deep-seated and long-running tendency to understand the relationship between citizens and authorities, or rulers and subjects, in parafamilial terms of hierarchical mutual dependence. And just as a parent might be caring or abusive, one can ask if the relationship between the state and its 'children' is also understood in terms of functioning and malfunctioning forms of dependence? Along these lines, there is quite a striking difference between the argumentation and rhetoric of those from affluent parts of the city and those from informal settlements. The suburban residents justify their demands by their rate-paying, while the informals refer to land and other natural resources as a collective asset and to an ideal of a shared political community in which it is immoral by the haves to forget and not care about the have-nots.

Another point worth mentioning is that Namibian rural-urban migration often does not consist of a single, one-way move from the countryside to the city but is often a part of families' diversified, long-term livelihood strategies that straddle multiple activities and involve movements and connections between the country and the city. This of course also has implications for example to how and where people invest their earnings. But this is not to say that these people don't need decent housing in the city. Such diversified strategies are the reality, probably for good reasons, and probably for a long time to come, hence they should be factored into solutions.

One more point is that informalities arise out of necessity and reflect the hard realities of life in the city, but there is also a fair amount of tactical agency and future orientation involved. People talk of staking a claim to land, to a place of one's own, even buying and selling informal plots. A lot of this has to do with anticipated future developments, the expectation that gradual recognition and upgrading would eventually lead to land ownership in the city. So, land is a complicated beast. Its uses are essential for the existence or lack of basic welfare. It can also be an avenue into a more independent life. But apart from such use values, it is also about capturing current and anticipated financial value – also in the informal settlements. And it is not the case that these logics stand clearly apart; quite often people think and act along all of them.

Which brings us to the issue of land versus housing. What exactly are we talking about and what exactly is the problem?

If it is access to land that we believe is the key – and that of course is what many are talking about – then the broad outlines seem quite clear. Either the City of Windhoek should make a big push in increasing land availability through upgrading existing settlements coupled with relocation sites

for those for whom there is no room in the existing settlements. The need for relocations obviously also depends on solutions for upgrading and what degree of density they allow, as well as the residents' preferences. In any case, this option requires a lot of funds and hence would likely depend on large-scale central government subvention. But on the other hand, it might also generate new revenue streams through leases, instalments or other fees.

Alternatively, or in combination, providing more secure forms of tenure without the usual cumbersome and costly process of land delivery could free up people's energies and investments from below, enable bottom-up housing solutions and cut on the costs. To illustrate, in my other fieldsite, Gaborone and its vicinity, the system of free allocation of tribal land has enabled something along these lines. For sure, the system has generated huge waiting lists, speculation and thinly veiled informal markets in tribal land, but it has also facilitated the emergence of a sizable segment of small-scale landholders next to the city. These in turn provide reasonably priced, modest but decent rental housing for a great number of people.

In Namibia there have been efforts towards similar bottom-up provision through the saving groups, governmental programmes of affordable housing and the flexible tenure approach, but so far they have not become the norm. In the end, whether they can do so in Windhoek will depend on the preparedness and capacity of the municipality to avail land faster, cheaper and more flexibly, whatever the exact mechanism for doing so.

Another question is whether we should be talking about access to land or decent housing. The two can go together but they are not necessarily always the same. Better and more secure access to land can provide a basis for housing solutions but decent housing can also take the form of denser forms of urbanity such as flats, and rentals in addition to homeownership. In the current situation, these tend to have a bad reputation due to their association with excessive prices and profiteering, but that is not necessarily always the case.

However, from what people are telling me, there seems to be quite a strong ideal in the Namibian context of households having their own plot and their own house. In part, I believe this reflects the long-established ideal of South African and Namibian white bourgeois lifestyle. But in part it also reflects the symbolic significance of land that stems from the long history of land dispossession. To put forward a claim to a piece of land, then, is not just a practical matter of improving one's material status. It is also about claiming a share of collective wealth that is seen to have been wrongfully alienated and via it, full membership in the political community.

Such ideas can also be seen as a motivating factor in some existing policies. But one has to ask whether this is sustainable in the long run in the context of growing cities? What would it mean in terms of use of resources, transport, access to public facilities and forms of sociality? It might also stand in the way of more efficient solutions towards decent housing for those currently without it. We have to take existing convictions and lifestyle preferences into account, but at the same time, such things are not unchanging.

One often mentioned problem is that of affordability. The issue of decent housing is closely tied to the overall inequality of the Namibian society, which generates a huge affordability problem. It is possible to try to solve this through regulation, for example through rental price controls or limiting the number of plots that one can own, but what would such measures mean in terms of

incentives to provide housing units? It seems abundantly clear that currently market-driven provision cannot cater for those with low incomes. But is the solution to prevent the making of profit from land and housing or is it to complement market-driven developments with approaches that enable the poor to better access to decent housing through easing land availability and secure tenure combined with soft loans, leases or rental subsidies?

However, I think at the root of the problem there is something more fundamental. In a broader sense, there is a need to rethink and reorganize the revenue and redistribution regime in a way that narrows the gap between the haves and have-nots. It is evident that this does not happen automatically through any kind of trickle-down mechanism. I think to some extent this has already been understood in Namibia and throughout Southern Africa. There have been impressive improvements in decreasing poverty through service delivery and cash transfers. However, the idea of full employment still seems to stand in the way of targeting also the able-bodied and working-aged with such benefits. Employment is of course not just a practical matter of making a living but also a matter of dignity and social esteem. Yet I think we have to accept that full employment seems utopian in the current Namibian context with its predominantly capital-intensive formal economy. Could the situation of the majority be helped through a system of, for example, unemployment benefits or basic income, with implications to their ability to improve their lot by having a degree of financial room for manoeuvre, but also to their ability to own or rent decent housing? This would of course require also increased revenue, for example through a more robust taxation of high incomes, land and other forms of property, or capital incomes.

Let me now make some concluding points. I think a key observation is that there has been quite a lot of debate around many of the issues I mentioned for a long time. In principle, the players or stakeholders in the field probably know what might work. Are there perhaps then systemic, institutional or political impediments to implementing those solutions?

Is there a conflict of interest among some influential players between providing land and housing for the poor, on the one hand, and making profit from rising land values, speculation and inflated housing prices, on the other?

Is there a dynamic of material benefits exchanged for political support that would potentially erode with increased independence of poor residents on the authorities that now have power to regulate access to the basics of decent living?

Are there institutional path-dependencies that prevent key players from imagining and doing things differently from the past?

Is there a tendency to view the poor as a problem, as lazy, and a threat to be controlled, instead of potentially resourceful, productive and dignified citizens?

These questions point towards the conclusion that perhaps in addition to suggesting the practical solutions, we should also be asking how to break such systemic impediments.

Is that happening? What are the trends? To point at just one issue involved, I am struck by the perseverance and reproduction of the dual city model 30 years into independence. The northwestern parts of Windhoek are still strikingly – and in some ways increasingly – different from its southeastern parts. And there is another step in the process currently underway, with

new suburban spaces developing as islands of affluence and tranquility for the upper and middle classes. I am referring to gated communities in the City itself but also to new developments like Ongos, Elisenheim, Finkenstein, etc.. These contribute to the reproduction of the dual city and along with it of a dual society that does not inspire empathy and identification between the haves and have-nots. And as the City must rely on service charges for most of its revenue, it might be encouraged to keep favouring its rate-payers at the expense of its poorer residents.

In conclusion, this brings me back to the point that perhaps what is needed is not only identifying technical solutions – for many of them are well-known and have been proposed many times – but popular pressure and participation to push solutions forward. What is going on at the moment is not merely a practical issue of housing, livelihoods and services but also a kind of a massive 'negotiation' – in a very broad sense of the term – over how to understand land and rights to it, and even more fundamentally, over what kind of a society Namibia is and should be.