

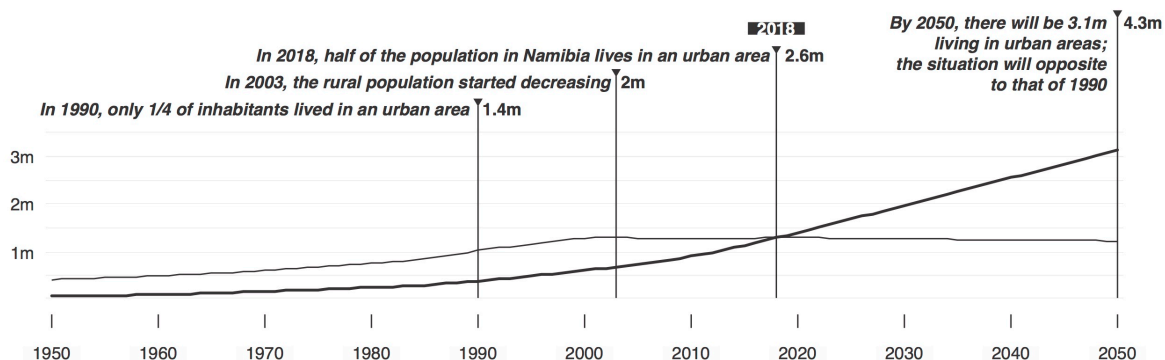


Namibia's urban revolution

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Recently, the United Nations' latest World Urbanization Prospects were released. While the global trend continues to be an increased growth of urban areas, there was an important landmark for Namibia. 2018 appears to be the moment when half of Namibia's population is living in an urban area. To put this in perspective, South Africa experienced this precisely in 1990; while Latin America as a whole reached this point in the 1960s. Differently from earlier projections in 2014, Namibia's urbanization seems to be happening at an even faster rate than expected four years ago. The current estimates foresee that by 2050, only a third of Namibia's population will live in a rural area.

Such a transformation is not linear, and is not only about the growth of 'urban' centres. 'The rural' becomes more 'urban' with widespread telecommunication coverage, improved transport and energy networks, or 'modern' building in traditional contexts. 'The traditional' also doesn't disappear, but finds itself with new tools at its disposal and new circumstances in its development. The question is whether there is nation-wide awareness of the significance of the deep socio-spatial transformation that Namibia is undergoing to be able to steer this transformation.



Source: World Urbanization Prospects, 2018.

An example of this is the Second Land Conference, which is set to take place later this year. In 1991, when the first Land Conference took place, less than a third of the population lived in an urban area. It may have been understandable then that little emphasis was placed on urban land matters. However, the consequences of neglecting urbanization are experienced by many today. While the informal urban population in 1990 was estimated to be only 20%, today the majority of those living in urban areas live in informal settlements, as the Shack Dwellers' Federation of Namibia's 'Community Land Information Programme' shows. Similarly, recent figures also point to the fact that Namibia's informal economy is overtaking the formal economy in terms of employment, and even GDP. These are massive changes which took only three decades to take place. Therefore, the Second Land Conference should not merely look at the 50/50 rural/urban context in 2018, but at the 2050 situation where more than 3 million inhabitants are expected to be living in urban areas in Namibia alone, and when the urban/rural proportion will be exactly the opposite as that in 1990.



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Attention to 'the urban question' is required. While indeed Africa as a whole is still largely rural, it is the fastest-urbanising continent in the world. Despite this, only one in three African countries have a national urbanisation plan or strategy; Namibia is not one of them. Without such a plan, future and ongoing developmental programmes remain without a clear lead on how to achieve more with the most strategic use of public resources. Such a plan could also lead the grassroots, civil society and the private sector in joining government in its efforts, as the objectives in terms of where socio-spatial development is heading would be outlined. To do so, it would need legitimacy, which would require engaging the various voices claiming their right to the city.

The key aspect of 'urban growth', is *how* the growth is taking place. Namibia continues at the top of the most unequal countries in the world, and its towns, cities and settlements, as well as its rural areas and other spaces are not only a reflection of this, but also engines perpetuating and expanding structural inequities. The urgent call is to start imagining an urban future; to envision *a kind* of growth that is less uneven, that breaks with the segregated past, and that presents a vision of the new society that is hoped for in the future.

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Reference

UNDESA. (2018). *World Urbanization Prospects: The 2018 Revision*. United Nations Population Division, Department of Economic and Social Affairs. Retrieved from <https://esa.un.org/unpd/wup/>

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