

Keynote Address

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It is a great pleasure to be back at the Namibia University of Science and Technology for the second Public Forum on Housing and Urbanisation. Last time I was here, two years ago, I was pleased to see this new platform for critical debate on urbanisation emerge. Urbanisation within a free society is a very complex process which requires many minds to come together in order to understand it better and transform it in progressive ways. Today, I see again a broad variety of stakeholders present to discuss issues of contemporary urbanisation and, especially, the aspect of adequate housing, which has a central role within this debate.

Since 2015, the urban land and housing crisis has only become more pronounced in the public discourse, and as a Government we have made a pledge to address it head-on, as laid out in the Harambee Prosperity Plan¹. In fact, the President's notion of building the Namibian House is a metaphor for Government's ambitions to address the lasting socio-economic and spatial inequalities with which Namibia is burdened. However, today it is up to us to turn these legacies around in ways that confirm the vision of a shared future in the Namibian House.

I am excited to see invited speakers from neighbouring countries and overseas who will share with us experiences and useful knowledge from their own perspective and work with us in the next two days to devise strategies that will be able to shape the future of housing and urbanisation in inclusive and equitable ways. Besides that, Namibia has committed itself to various international resolutions, most recently the New Urban Agenda developed during the Habitat III conference in Quito, Ecuador, in October 2016. A Namibian delegation was sent to represent us in this relevant international event. This means that we are eager to learn from other countries' experiences and see what can be useful for the particular case of Namibia. It is now time to decide what the new urban agenda for Namibia will be.

Comrade Vice-Chancellor, distinguished participants:

I am thankful for the colleagues at the Integrated Land Management Institute at NUST who have heeded the call by my Ministry to organise a forum on housing which will inform the ongoing revision of the Government's Mass Housing Development Programme – a priority project which has been commissioned to a trans-disciplinary team led by NUST, but also including experts from the University of Namibia and the private sector. NUST has also assisted the Ministry by taking part in the committee meetings of the Massive Urban Land Servicing Programme, which forms an integral part of the Government's housing strategy.

Land provision, and adequate housing in particular, are issues for which it is difficult to find easy answers and which are even more difficult to resolve in a short period of time. Adequate housing concerns not only my Ministry, but many others; the structure of Government itself does not always encourage integrated development as responsibilities and budgets are sometimes fragmented across different ministries and other Government Offices and Agencies. Yet, the Ministry of Urban and Rural Development is taking a leading role in trying to achieve more integrated approaches to urban development, and the proposed National Spatial Development Framework² will be key to achieving this aim. The Ministry will continue to require the assistance of other ministries, academic institutions, the private sector and civil society to drive the future urban agenda.

While legislation and statutory requirements are being revised to decentralise and make urban development processes more efficient, this alone will not serve to provide land and adequate housing to Namibians. Given the current economic outlook of the country, which requires everyone to tighten their belts, public spending related to land and housing provision needs to be wisely administered. Although Government will not be able to build a house for every Namibian household, it can enable the conditions for Namibians to access the right to adequate housing through various win-win initiatives such as public-private partnerships that the Government fully supports.

Distinguished participants, ladies and gentlemen:

Therefore, one aspect we are looking forward to developing during this forum is to widen the definition of housing. Instead of understanding housing as "a house that is bought through some form of financing mechanism", we are interested in a broad array of housing opportunities which can range from secured land tenure with Government support for incremental housing investment, housing for special needs, informal settlement upgrading, densification of existing plots and underutilised inner city lots of land, to targeted interventions for social and rental housing, amongst others.

The dominant understanding of housing as property, as simply an economic asset, at times limits our vision of imagining better and more adequate housing. Proposals that rely solely on property values, financing mechanisms and formal income will only be adequate for one part of the socio-economic spectrum we need to empower. Compatriots who earn a living in the informal economy and low-paid wage economy need housing as much as anybody else and solutions for them will not be the same as for Government employees, civil servants or young professionals. The elderly, the unemployed, students and rural households are other specific groups we need to consider.

Furthermore, Government's commitment to decentralisation requires us not only to think deeply about the form of rural housing, but also to imagine economic opportunities that can be developed in more remote areas of the country. Shelter alone will not empower people: it needs to allow them to have a base for generating a livelihood in whichever way they can. The large part of the Namibian population that relies on livelihoods generated from informal economic activities will need to be enabled to grow economic activities from

² See Urban and Regional Planning Act, 2018 (No. 5 of 2018), available at https://laws.parliament.na/cms_documents/urban-and-regional-planning--1b90438147.pdf, last accessed 20 July 2018.

¹ Available at <http://www.gov.na/documents/10181/264466/HPP+page+70-71.pdf/bc958f46-8f06-4c48-9307-773f242c9338>, last accessed 10 August 2019.

their homes, equipping them to improve their and their families' socio-economic situation from within.

Housing, thus, has a role to play in the larger economic development and industrialisation of the country. While we are historically very dependent on imports, especially from South Africa, housing does not only imply short-term jobs in the construction industry: people will also need to buy furniture and household utensils, materials that could be manufactured locally and local services –all of which could have a lasting economic impact. All these sectors and more could be stimulated with concerted efforts towards adequate housing provision.

Director of Ceremonies, distinguished participants:

Design and construction of housing should also be varied in relation to varying climatic zones in Namibia, environmental limitations and resource availability, sustainable energy production, affordable green-alternative solutions, and the social and demographic realities of households. Given the fact that Namibia's future is set to be predominantly urban, as in many other parts of the world, we need to understand that housing cannot be seen only in terms of individual housing units, but only also as the building blocks of streets, neighbourhoods and, ultimately, the city. Thus, it is critical to invest in the public and shared infrastructure in the urban design of well-integrated neighbourhoods and cities to ensure they are accessible and well-connected with regard to public transport options, public facilities and collective spaces.

Housing can be an issue that can be divisive, but it can also be an occasion for joining forces. Lack of access to housing and urban land can be a major factor leading to social instability, as people realise how urban opportunities become increasingly uneven. However, if we come together and develop inclusive, equitable and progressive strategies, housing can become a factor of unity, of solidarity, and of contributing to the sentiment of One Namibia, One Nation.

Let us therefore welcome our international guests, members of Government, local authorities, professionals, students, community-based organisations and members of the media to this Forum that invites us to “rethink housing and urbanisation” in Namibia at this crucial time for our country.

I hereby declare this event open and wish you all the best in the worthwhile tasks ahead.

I thank you.

