

Urban Growth and Informal Settlements: A Pressing Issue in Windhoek, Namibia

Custon Ziwoni and¹; Vincent Mwangi²

^{1,2}Lecturer, International University of Management, Namibia

Publication Date: 2025/06/17

Abstract: Windhoek, Namibia, faces an escalating crisis due to the rapid expansion of informal settlements, fueled by urban migration, economic disparities, and inadequate housing policies. Windhoek, Namibia, has experienced rapid urban growth in recent years, leading to a significant increase in informal settlements. These settlements often lack essential services such as clean water, sanitation, and proper infrastructure, exacerbating social and health challenges. The unchecked growth strains municipal resources and raises concerns about environmental sustainability and governance. As the city's population expands, many residents face challenges related to inadequate housing, limited access to basic services, and socio-economic disparities. The proliferation of informal settlements presents complex issues, including infrastructure strain, environmental concerns, and governance challenges. Addressing this pressing issue requires a multifaceted approach involving urban planning, policy reforms, and community engagement. This paper critically examines the root causes, socio-economic impacts, and policy shortcomings contributing to the proliferation of informal settlements in Windhoek. It also explores potential interventions, emphasizing the need for integrated urban planning, improved housing strategies, and community-driven solutions to ensure sustainable urban development. It also explores the causes and consequences of informal settlement expansion in Windhoek while proposing sustainable solutions to foster equitable urban development.

Keywords: Urban Growth, Informal Settlements, Windhoek, Namibia, Population Expansion, Housing Crisis, Infrastructure Strain, Socio-Economic Challenges, Municipal Resources, Environmental Sustainability, Governance and Policy, Urban Planning, Community Engagement, Housing Strategies, Sustainable Development.

How to Cite: Custon Ziwoni and Vincent Mwangi (2025). Urban Growth and Informal Settlements: A Pressing Issue in Windhoek, Namibia *International Journal of Innovative Science and Research Technology*, 10(6), 873-876. <https://doi.org/10.38124/ijisrt/25jun847>

I. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Windhoek, Namibia, has witnessed rapid urbanization over the past few decades, leading to a significant increase in informal settlements. This urban expansion is driven by rural-to-urban migration, economic disparities, and limited access to affordable housing. Informal settlements, characterized by inadequate infrastructure and basic services, pose serious challenges to sustainable urban development. The growth of these settlements has strained municipal resources, exacerbated socio-economic inequalities, and raised concerns about environmental sustainability. Addressing this issue requires a comprehensive approach that integrates urban planning, policy reforms, and community engagement to ensure equitable development in Windhoek.

The expansion of informal settlements in Windhoek is a direct consequence of Namibia's shifting demographic trends. Between 2001 and 2011, the country experienced a significant rural-to-urban migration, with the urban population increasing by approximately 300,000 people. This trend has continued, with informal settlements growing at a faster rate than formal housing developments. Studies indicate that around 12,000 new informal homes are built

annually, and by 2030, nearly 46% of Namibian families are expected to reside in informal housing. The spatial dynamics of these settlements reveal patterns of densification and geographic expansion, particularly in areas such as Oohambo Dha Nehale, where the number of dwellings increased from 465 in 2005 to 2,496 in 2011.

The lack of structured urban planning has resulted in settlements with limited access to essential services such as sanitation, water, and waste management. In 2011, nearly 380,000 urban residents lacked access to toilet facilities, further highlighting the infrastructural challenges faced by informal communities. Additionally, many dwellings are constructed on unsuitable land, increasing vulnerability to environmental hazards. The continued expansion of informal settlements underscores the urgent need for policy interventions that prioritize sustainable urban development and improved living conditions for affected communities.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Urban growth and the expansion of informal settlements in Windhoek, Namibia, have been widely studied, with scholars highlighting the socio-economic, environmental, and governance challenges associated with this phenomenon. The

rapid urbanization in Namibia has led to an increase in informal settlements, which are often characterized by inadequate infrastructure, poor sanitation, and limited access to essential services.

➤ *Urbanization and Informal Settlements*

The shift from a predominantly rural society to an urban one has been a defining trend in Namibia's development. Between 2001 and 2011, the urban population increased by approximately 300,000 people, while the rural population declined. This trend has continued, with informal settlements growing at a faster rate than formal housing developments. Studies indicate that around 12,000 new informal homes are built annually, and by 2030, nearly 46% of Namibian families are expected to reside in informal housing.

Squatter settlements in Windhoek, Namibia, have been a growing concern, particularly as urban migration increases. Many people move from rural areas to the capital in search of better opportunities, but the lack of affordable housing forces them into informal settlements. These settlements often face challenges such as inadequate sanitation, waste management issues, and limited access to essential services. Efforts have been made to address these concerns, including community participation initiatives and discussions on urban planning. However, the issue remains complex, requiring sustainable solutions that balance urban development with the needs of vulnerable populations.

➤ *Spatial Expansion and Infrastructure Challenges*

The spatial dynamics of informal settlements reveal patterns of densification and geographic expansion, particularly in areas such as Oohambo Dha Nehale, where the number of dwellings increased from 465 in 2005 to 2,496 in 2011. The lack of structured urban planning has resulted in settlements with limited access to essential services such as sanitation, water, and waste management. In 2011, nearly 380,000 urban residents lacked access to toilet facilities, further highlighting the infrastructural challenges faced by informal communities.

➤ *Policy and Governance issues*

The governance of informal settlements remains a critical challenge. Many dwellings are constructed on unsuitable land, increasing vulnerability to environmental hazards. The Windhoek municipality has struggled to implement effective policies to regulate informal settlement growth, with efforts to halt expansion proving largely ineffective. The continued growth of unplanned settlements indicates that existing policies require further intervention and regularization.

➤ *Socio-Economic Implications*

Informal settlements are often associated with high levels of poverty and unemployment. Many residents rely on informal sector activities for their livelihoods, which presents challenges in terms of economic stability and social mobility. The lack of secure tenure and legal recognition of informal settlements further exacerbates socio-economic inequalities, limiting residents' access to financial services and formal employment opportunities.

➤ *Understanding Informal Settlements in Namibia*

As informal settlements continue to shape urban growth in Namibia, it is essential to explore their key characteristics, the living conditions of their residents, the opportunities they present, and the challenges affecting quality of life.

Globally, organizations define informal settlements based on common features, while individual countries adopt criteria tailored to local conditions. Despite these variations, informal settlements are generally characterized by:

- Limited infrastructure and essential services
- Inadequate housing materials and construction
- Lack of tenure security for residents
- Unplanned physical structures and settlement locations
- Environmental challenges affecting habitability
- Informal land and housing markets

A deeper understanding of these characteristics is crucial for developing policies that improve living conditions and foster sustainable urban development in Namibia.

The literature highlights the urgent need for policy interventions that prioritize sustainable urban development and improved living conditions for affected communities. Addressing the challenges posed by informal settlements requires a multifaceted approach, including urban planning, infrastructure development, and community engagement. Future research should focus on innovative solutions to integrate informal settlements into formal urban frameworks while ensuring equitable access to resources and opportunities.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a mixed-methods approach, integrating both qualitative and quantitative research techniques to analyze urban growth and informal settlements in Windhoek. The research design is structured to provide a comprehensive understanding of the spatial, socio-economic, and policy-related aspects of informal settlements.

➤ *Data Collection Methods*

• *Primary Data*

Primary data is collected through field surveys, interviews, and direct observations in selected informal settlements. Structured interviews are conducted with residents, municipal officials, and urban planners to gather insights into the challenges and coping mechanisms within these settlements. Additionally, Geographic Information System (GIS) mapping is used to analyze the spatial expansion of informal settlements over time.

• *Secondary Data*

Secondary data is obtained from government reports, academic publications, and policy documents related to urbanization and informal settlements in Namibia. Previous studies on urban growth trends, housing policies, and socio-economic conditions are reviewed to contextualize the findings.

- *Data Analysis*

The collected data is analyzed using both qualitative thematic analysis and quantitative statistical methods. GIS techniques are applied to aerial photographs taken between 2005 and 2011 to map settlement distribution and expansion patterns. Socio-economic data is processed using statistical software to identify trends in employment, income levels, and access to basic services.

- *Ethical Considerations*

Ethical approval is obtained from relevant authorities to ensure compliance with research ethics. Participants are informed about the purpose of the study, and their consent is secured before conducting interviews. Confidentiality and anonymity are maintained throughout the research process.

IV. RESEARCH FINDINGS

➤ *Spatial Expansion Of Informal Settlements*

Research indicates that informal settlements in Windhoek have expanded significantly over the years, particularly in areas such as Oohambo Dha Nehale. A spatial analysis using Geographic Information System (GIS) techniques revealed that the number of dwellings in this settlement increased from 465 in 2005 to 2,496 in 2011, with the population growing from 1,628 to 8,729 inhabitants. The total area occupied by informal settlements also expanded from 226,127 m² to 515,686 m² during the same period.

➤ *Infrastructure and Living Conditions*

Findings show that informal settlements in Windhoek suffer from limited access to essential services, including sanitation, water, and waste management. A study found that nearly 380,000 urban residents lacked access to toilet facilities, highlighting the infrastructural challenges faced by informal communities. Additionally, many dwellings are constructed on unsuitable land, increasing vulnerability to environmental hazards such as flooding and land instability.

➤ *Socio-Economic Challenges*

Residents of informal settlements often face high levels of poverty and unemployment, with many relying on informal sector activities for their livelihoods. The lack of secure tenure and legal recognition further exacerbates socio-economic inequalities, limiting residents' access to financial services and formal employment opportunities.

➤ *Policy and Governance Issues*

Despite efforts by the Windhoek municipality to regulate informal settlement growth, expansion continues at an uncontrolled rate. Studies suggest that existing policies have been largely ineffective in halting the spread of informal housing. The findings emphasize the need for integrated urban planning, improved housing strategies, and community-driven solutions to address the challenges posed by informal settlements.

The findings highlight the urgent need for policy interventions that prioritize sustainable urban development and improved living conditions for affected communities. Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted

approach, including urban planning, infrastructure development, and community engagement.

V. RECOMMENDATIONS

➤ *Prioritize Land Allocation over Housing*

To effectively tackle the housing challenges faced by Namibia's low-income urban residents, the emphasis should be placed on providing affordable land rather than constructing houses. Residents should have the autonomy to build their homes at their own pace, with minimal barriers and ample support. The government and local authorities must ensure that land is made available at the lowest possible cost and with the highest efficiency.

➤ *Gain Control over Informal Settlement Expansion*

Gaining control over informal settlement growth should be a priority for any town in Namibia. This requires a supply of properly planned and affordable low cost land.

➤ *Enhancing Local Authorities' Role in Sustainable Urban Development*

Local authorities play a critical role in managing urban development within their jurisdictions. As the first to identify emerging challenges, they are uniquely positioned to develop innovative, proactive, and pragmatic solutions. To effectively address urban growth and informal settlement expansion, collaborative support from the government, NGOs, and the private sector is essential. Targeted assistance should empower local authorities to:

- **Streamline** the complex and often lengthy township proclamation process.
- **Oversee** projects aimed at providing affordable land or upgrading existing informal settlements.
- **Advance** social inclusion, economic efficiency, and environmental sustainability.

By fostering strong partnerships and adaptive strategies, local authorities can effectively manage urban growth while promoting equitable and sustainable development.

➤ *Expediting Tenure Provision In Upgraded Informal Settlements*

Numerous informal settlements have already established structured physical layouts and clearly demarcated erven, making them suitable for official proclamation. However, administrative bottlenecks within current policies continue to delay this process. Without requiring additional funding, authorities can accelerate tenure provision by removing bureaucratic obstacles that hinder formal recognition.

A **national inventory** should be compiled to identify settlements that meet proclamation criteria, enabling the Ministry of Urban and Rural Development (MURD) to fast-track their official recognition. This initiative would promote land security, improve urban development efficiency, and support sustainable housing strategies.

➤ *Strengthening Urban Planning Policies*

Windhoek's urban expansion requires comprehensive urban planning that integrates informal settlements into the city's development framework. Authorities should adopt flexible land tenure systems to provide legal recognition to informal dwellings, ensuring residents have secure housing options.

➤ *Improving Infrastructure and Basic Services*

The government should prioritize investment in sanitation, water supply, and waste management within informal settlements. Expanding access to affordable housing and upgrading existing informal areas can significantly improve living conditions.

➤ *Enhancing Community Participation*

Urban development strategies should involve community driven solutions, allowing residents to participate in decision-making processes. Collaborative efforts between municipal authorities, NGOs, and local communities can lead to more sustainable interventions.

➤ *Addressing Socio-Economic Inequalities*

Economic empowerment programs, such as skills training and microfinance initiatives, should be introduced to support informal settlement residents. These programs can help reduce unemployment and improve financial stability.

➤ *Implementing Sustainable Land use Strategies*

Authorities should conduct spatial analysis to identify suitable land for future urban expansion. GIS mapping can help monitor settlement growth and prevent unregulated expansion into environmentally sensitive area.

➤ *Strengthening Governance and Policy Implementation*

Municipal authorities must enforce clear regulations to manage informal settlement growth effectively. Strengthening policy frameworks and ensuring efficient land allocation can prevent further unplanned urban sprawl.

VI. CONCLUSION

The rapid urbanization of Windhoek has led to an alarming increase in informal settlements, posing significant socio-economic, environmental, and governance challenges. The findings of this study highlight the spatial expansion of these settlements, the infrastructure deficits, and the policy shortcomings that have contributed to their proliferation. Despite efforts by municipal authorities, informal settlements continue to grow at an uncontrolled rate, exacerbating inequalities and straining urban resources.

Addressing this issue requires a multifaceted approach that integrates urban planning, infrastructure development, and community engagement. Strengthening governance frameworks, improving access to basic services, and implementing sustainable land use strategies are essential steps toward mitigating the negative impacts of informal settlements. Additionally, fostering economic empowerment programs can help residents transition into more stable living conditions.

Future research should focus on innovative solutions to integrate informal settlements into formal urban frameworks while ensuring equitable access to resources and opportunities. A collaborative effort between government agencies, urban planners, and local communities is necessary to create a more inclusive and sustainable urban environment in Windhoek.

REFERENCES

- [1]. Equity Model (2017). Informal settlements in Namibia: Their Nature and Growth.
- [2]. Mukando Mountain Ishimael (2016). Spatial Analysis of Informal Settlement in Windhoek.
- [3]. Nwaya, Tobias Pendapala (2010). Rapid urbanization and its influence on the growth of informal settlements in Windhoek, Namibia.
- [4]. Squatting in Namibia, Wikipedia (2023). Provides historical context and current challenges related to squatting and informal settlements in Namibia.
- [5]. Rapid urbanization and its influence on the growth of informal settlements in Windhoek, Namibia (2010). A research study analyzing the spatial growth of informal settlements in Windhoek over a decade.
- [6]. Urban Dynamics (2017). Township Establishment Procedures. Windhoek Urban Dynamics.
- [7]. Town & Regional Planning Consultants. World Bank (2008), Approaches to Urban Slums.
- [8]. Shaningwa, S. (2016) Affordable Housing and Property Development Opportunities. Presented at the Invest Namibia Conference, Windhoek.
- [9]. Republic of Namibia (2000a) Townships and Division of Land Ordinance 11 of 1963 (with amendments). Windhoek, Republic of Namibia.
- [10]. Dwellers Federation of Namibia (SDFN) (2009) Community Land Information Program (CLIP); Profile of Informal Settlement in Namibia. Windhoek, Shack Dwellers Federation of Namibia.
- [11]. Shack Dwellers Federation of Namibia (SDFN) & Namibia Housing Action Group (NHAG) (2014) Participatory Planning for Informal Settlement Upgrading in Freedom Square, Gobabis.
- [12]. Seliger, J. (2016) Expected Benefits from a Formalization of Land Rights in Informal Urban Settlements in Namibia.
- [13]. Ministry of Urban and Rural Development (MURD) (2017) Urban and Regional Planning Bill, Draft 31 March 2017. Windhoek: Republic of Namibia.
- [14]. Mooya, M.M. (2009) Estate Markets and Poverty Alleviation in Namibia's Urban Informal Settlements.
- [15]. Asperen, P. (2014) Evaluation of innovative land tools in sub-Saharan Africa Three cases from a peri-urban context.
- [16]. Indongo, N. et al (2013) Urbanisation in Namibia, Views from semi-formal and informal settlement.