

Too Poor to Own Land – Martin Mendelsohn

North Central Namibia is interesting, and exciting for so many reasons. For me the best is driving through the informal clusters of small colourful cuca shops, flats, brick-makers, restaurants, tailors and more.

While not perfect, tenure arrangements allow people to create these clusters of enterprise. Traders have enough security and confidence to build their businesses. Owners invest in their enterprises; growing them from tin into formal structures, and adding value to the local and national economy. Property is informally titled but permanent, protected.

Fast forward to modern Windhoek (and other formal towns) and informal is forbidden. You might say that it is good that there is no room for informal chaos or scruffy businesses in Windhoek. But cumbersome (and very old) red tape, obsessions with unrealistic standards, and the need to supply costly services before tenure all slow land provision and drive up its prices. These are the tools we use for ‘development’ but they keep the poor, poor. They stop those living informally from building better lives for themselves.

We can learn from the ‘North’ by giving individuals a piece of land where they can build an enterprise, build a home, and build a life. All this can be started without individual water, sewerage, electricity or even a proper road.

Just 4 pegs are needed to mark where each property starts and ends, this gives everyone big reason to add and create value. Perhaps people aren’t given the best services straight away, but their lives today are better than yesterday. The other stuff will come later, what they have today is something, yesterday they had nothing.

People move to towns for services and to create wealth. The city should be giving them a chance to do this, for the benefit of them, the city and the country. Giving individuals the right to property (a basic human right) today will solve more problems in the long run than not doing so now, because from today wealth that will grow in future will be created.

If we wait another 10 or 15 years informal numbers will rise even more, no value will be created, and the city will be trying to support an even greater poor population that has been excluded from the opportunity to create wealth for themselves. Give every resident 4 pegs and the opportunity to make Namibia a rich country... for everyone.

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