High-rise Flats: A Case of a Failed Densification Agenda in Zimbabwe?

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Abstract

Land is a finite resource that requires careful management. When land is not carefully managed, it can be wasted, and this can result in urban sprawl. Many urban settlements in Zimbabwe typically are sprawling outwards, eating into the land that is supposed to be for agriculture and other non-urban uses. Zimbabwe's capital city, Harare, has more than doubled the area it covers over the past few decades. It is estimated that Harare grew its urban footprint from approximately 300km^2 at independence in 1980 to about 1000m^2 only 30 years later by the year 2010. This exponential outward urban spatial growth has taken place despite deliberate planning policies and measures to curb urban sprawl. Two important policies are contained in the Harare Master Plan that demonstrate the planning intention to contain urban sprawl. These are densification and vertical development. If strictly implemented, these policies would have seen massive development of high-rise housing developments in the city. Using mixed research methods, the article reveals that there have not been any significant high-rise flat developments in Harare since the master plan was formulated. While the agenda remains in planning policy, practically this has not been a successful agenda.

Keywords: *rapid urbanisation, sustainable development, walk-up flats, housing backlog*

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INTRODUCTION

Harare is experiencing massive urban sprawl. The city is expanding very fast, rapidly eating into surrounding areas (City of Harare, 2002). This is despite both the principal planning law and the Harare Master Plan having a stated goal to efficiently utilise land and promote densification (City of Harare, 1993; GoZ, 1996a). This is happening within a global context of a shift in the demographic profile where, since 2008, more people now live in urban areas than in rural areas (United Nations, 2015). The trend is happening faster in cities in the sub-Saharan Africa region where rates of urbanisation are much higher than in the rest of the world (United Nations Human Settlements Programme, 2018). It is estimated that as much as 90%of all new urbanisation is occurring in Africa and other parts of the global South. Unfortunately, this rapid urbanisation is following a phenomenon known as urban sprawl. Towns and cities are expanding outward into rural agriculture and forests in a manner that does not recognise that land is a finite resource. This is exposing the cities to environmental degradation and exposure to the risk of natural disasters caused by climate change. These disasters tend to affect the poor more as they lack resources to prevent the effects of disasters and recovery after disasters. This is contrary to the objectives of the Sustainable Development Goal (SDGs) number 11, which seeks to build resilient and inclusive cities (UN, 2015). Linked to the SDGs is the New Urban Agenda (NUA), which aims to create planned and sustainable cities (Satterthwaite, 2016). While Zimbabwean cities are comparatively better planned, they are documented as developing laterally and quickly taking up all surrounding rural and fertile productive farmlands, thereby threatening the food security of the residents of those cities (Toriro, 2007). There is poor land-use planning and management around most urban areas, leading to pollution of water resources and unsustainable wetland management (Toriro, 2020).

Using examples in the City of Harare, the article analyses whether Zimbabwe's densification agenda has been implemented as intended.

Zimbabwe's urban planning laws aim to promote efficient and careful use of land. This is reflected in Harare's main land-use planning policy document, its master plan. Despite these noble and commendable intentions at both national and city levels, the evidence observed on the ground does not reflect those intentions. Despite the prevalence of some examples of densification, most development continues to take an unsustainable and reckless sprawl form.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The world is urbanising rapidly, and Zimbabwe is no exception. In the year 2008, the world reached a milestone in terms of its demographic structure by having more people living in cities than in rural areas as had been the situation historically (United Nations, 2014). In America, Europe, Latin America, Australia and Asia, more people live in urban areas than in rural areas. Africa currently has the lowest proportion of the population living in urban areas with approximately 40%of its population living in urban areas. The situation is, however, fast-changing as the bulk of all new urbanisation is happening in Africa (United Nations, 2018).

Urbanisation in Africa has not always brought about good living standards to the residents of the fast-growing cities. Urbanisation in Africa has not translated to improved living standards as happened in other parts of the world. Many of these rapidly urbanising cities face a plethora of challenges, such as high levels of informality, poor infrastructure to support the growth, high levels of unemployment and under-employment, poor transport networks and poor housing for most citizens (Mitullah, 2004; Tawodzera, 2010; Dube and Chirisa, 2012; Kamete, 2012 and 2013; Njaya, 2014; Crush *et al.,* 2015; Skinner and Watson, 2018; Toriro, 2019). Urban sprawl is a problem in Zimbabwe (Toriro, 2007). It comes with other problems of functional inefficiencies in cities. There is evidence in South Africa that urban sprawl is contributing to the high cost of transport, particularly for the urban poor (United Nations Human Settlements Programme, 2018). This should not

be the case because urban planning has the potential to solve most problems caused by rapid urbanisation in Africa (Tibaijuka, 2006).

Zimbabwean urban areas are experiencing the rapid growth that is trending in the rest of the African continent (Toriro, 2018). This is causing management challenges in peri-urban zones of urban areas including poor management of urban growth (Chatiza, 2016). Many of these peripheral settlements lack enabling basic infrastructures such as proper roads, reticulated water supplies, reticulated sewerage networks, and proper governance structures (Muchadenyika, 2015). Developing appropriate infrastructure to support this growth is an important consideration if these cities are to grow sustainably (Pieterse *et al*., 2018). Unfortunately, unrealistic dreams on the part of some city officials have caused some of them to drive visions that are out of sync with the reality of these cities (Watson, 2014). There tends to be a disconnect between the aspirations of the majority of residents of cities that are poor and powerless, and the values of the urban planners that do not resonate with those of the majority (Watson, 2003). There are many urbanisations and other public health challenges in these zones that challenge public health laws and land-use planning standards (GoZ, 1996).

Future projections of urban population increase for Africa are scary considering the current development trajectory being taken by African urbanisation. Although Africa has only 10% of the world's urban population, it is projected that African cities will house at least 30% of the world population by the turn of the century. This translates to a growth of a massive 2.2 billion new city residents over the period! (Hoornweg *et. al*., 2014). Scholars have indicated that African cities will require different approaches and considerable innovation by their different officials to manage the projected growth (Parnell *et al.,* 2009; Kamete, 2012 and 2017; Satterthwaite, 2016).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This article is based on data collected using different methods, including literature in the form of academic publications, key informant interviews, reports of the physical growth of the city, and the use of approved statutory and layout plans. It is informed by an extensive field observation exercise that visited areas that literature and other reports had indicated as having developments that resonated with the national and municipal densification intentions. Site visits were undertaken to observe the implementation of the densification policy on flat developments that took place within the Harare Master Plan area of coverage. Sites targeted for observation were selected using purposive sampling so that they were representative of the three common income areas, that is, low-income, middle-income and high-income areas. These translate to high-density, medium-density, and low-density areas.

FINDINGS

Five high-density housing projects in Tafara, Glen Norah, Mufakose, Highfield and Mbare were identified as some efforts at densification in Harare. Each of them is briefly described and analysed in terms of how it was able to meet the densification agenda. In all, eight (8) sites were investigated in different areas of Harare. Five of the sites were situated in the aforementioned low-income high-density areas; two in Harare medium-income suburban areas of Eastlea and Prospect, and one other site situated at the northern end of the Harare Central Business District (CBD). The different projects are separately discussed below. Densification was indicated by two variables: the extent to which many units optimally occupied a reduced size of land compared to what existed in the neighbourhood and the use of multi-level floors to house more units. So, both the floor area factor and maximum height were used as indicators of densification. The sites were purposively sampled so that they represented different income areas and institutions that had been indicated as providing high-density institutional housing. The different sites that are subjects of this study are shown in the map in Figure 1:

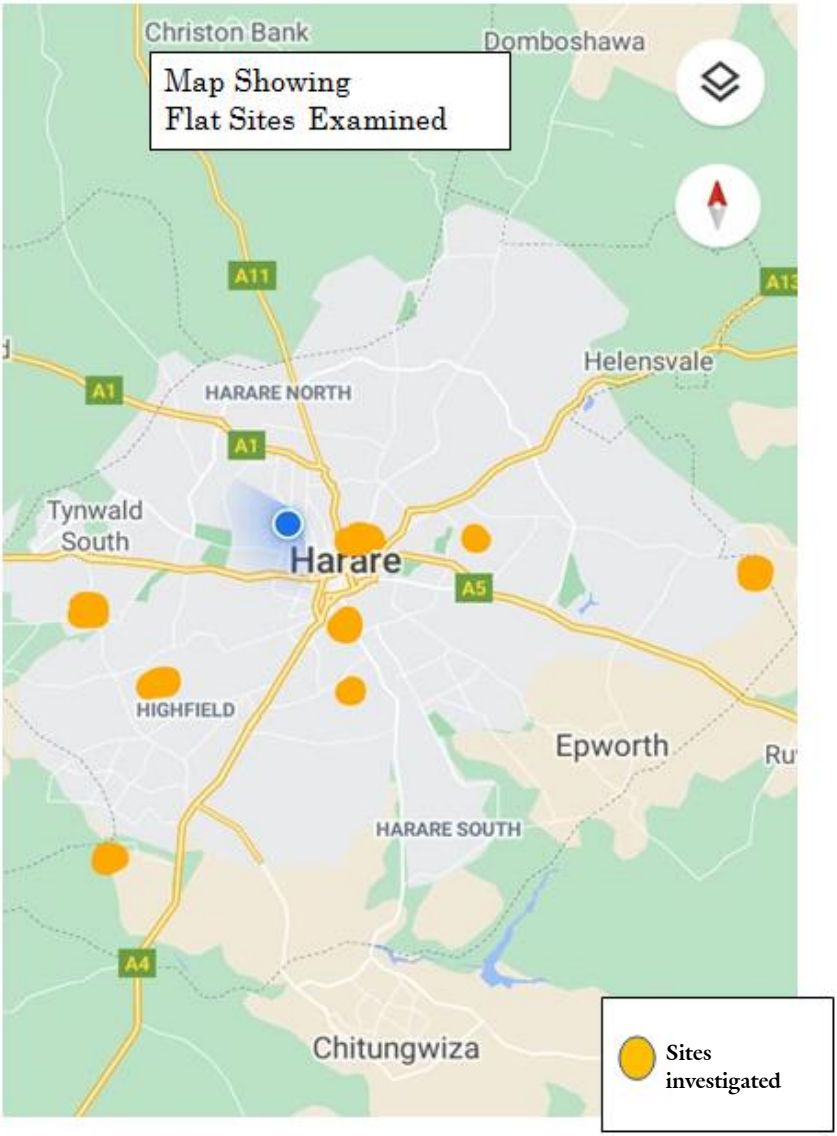

Figure 1: *All flat sites that were investigated in Harare* (Authors, 2021)

THE AVENUES, HARARE'S FLATS ZONE

The Avenues area in Harare refers to the area a few kilometres north of the Harare CBD. This area is important to Harare for two reasons. Firstly, it is the largest area zoned for flat development in terms of Harare's land use plans[3]. Secondly, its proximity to the city centre makes it one of the few walkable areas to the CBD for work, shopping or leisure. For many years, the Avenues area has been the most popular residential area for recent university graduates and many other young professionals. While numerous flats have more than four storeys in height, the overwhelming majority of the flat developments are only four storeys and below. According to a senior Town Planner working for the City of Harare, due to the high unmet demand for housing in the city, they expected massive development of high-rise flats in the Avenues area, but this has not happened.

'Harare has a housing backlog of more than 500 000 units. The Avenues is one of the best sites for flat development because the zoning is appropriate, and the sitting is convenient. Despite these factors, we have not witnessed a proportionate response in high-rise flat development. Most flats in the area are walk-up flats that, according to the regulations, can only be a maximum of five storeys'.

The opportunity to develop high-rise flats, even where both the planning laws and demand are suitable, has not been fully utilised.

GOVERNMENT FLATS PROJECTS

The Zimbabwean government has developed numerous flats as they work to bridge the huge housing demand. After interviews with key informants from the ministries responsible for housing development, that is, the Ministry of Local Government and the new Ministry of National

[3] According to the City Centre Local Development Plan Number 22, the Avenues is the largest flats zone in central Harare.

Housing, site visits were conducted to assess the density of some of the major government housing projects. Five large government projects were visited, three in low-income areas (Tafara, Marimba and Highfield) and two others in medium-income areas (Eastlea and Prospect).

Table 1: *Characterising Government Flat Projects* (Authors, 2021)

Site	Types of Flats	Maximum Height (Number of Storeys)
Tafara	2-bedroom flats	Four
Highfield	2-bedroom flats	Six
Marimba	3-bedroom flats	Four
Eastlea	2 and 3-bedroom flats	Four
Prospect	2 and 3-bedroom flats	Four

As shown in Table 1, most sites have flats with a height of up to four floors except for Highfield where most blocks go up to six floors. While on the ground these flat projects have high levels of density since one block with up to 12 units, occupies the space occupied by one single dwelling unit, the density could still increase.

Plate 1: *Government Flats in Eastlea, Harare* (Photo credit: Percy Toriro)

COUNCIL FLATS PROJECTS

The local authority, the City of Harare, implemented several flat projects in different parts of the city. These were assessed for their densification using height and footprint as the indicators of density. The survey reveals that most council projects comprise blocks with an average of 12 units each. Most blocks have a maximum height of three-storeys in low-income areas and two-storeys in middle and high-income areas. Each block covers an average area of 200 square metres, similar to the stand size allocated to an individual family unit in Harare's high-density areas..

Compared to single dwelling units, which are the most common housing typology in Harare, these flat projects represent a form of densification. They, however, remain inadequate in curbing urban sprawl as they could be utilised much more optimally. With increased height, the same spaces could accommodate a lot more units, thereby reducing the city's growth footprint. In the image below (Plate 2) which shows the City of Harare flats in the high-density suburb of Glen Norah, each block that appears with the letter 'H' contains 12 units. This means each block of 12 units occupies the same space as that occupied by two single-storey individual units in the rest of Glen Norah. The flats certainly represent densification and more intense use of land, but more could be achieved.

Plate 2: *City of Harare's Glen Norah Flats* (Authors, 2021)

Table 2: *City of Harare Flat Projects* (Authors, 2021)

Project	Type of Flats	Height (Storeys)
Glen Norah	2 and 3-bedrooms	Four
Belvedere	2-bedrooms	Two
Eastlea	3-bedrooms	Two
Trafalgar Court	Bed sitters and 1-bedrooms	Thirteen (13 floors)

Table 2 summarises the heights of council flats projects. Trafalgar Court in the CBD is the exception with a height of 13 storeys and housing hundreds of families.

POLICE RESIDENTIAL PROJECTS

The national police force, the Zimbabwe Republic Police (ZRP), provides institutional housing for its employees. The organisation has developed several housing projects in the form of flats and other housing. There is a high demand for these flats such that the organisation has not been able to meet demand. Three police projects were discussed with an official from the government Public Works Department to establish their response to the national densification agenda. These were the Tomlison Police Depot, the Chikurubi Support Unit residential complex and the Glen Norah Police residential quarters.

The Tomlison Depot, only three kilometres out of the Harare CBD, was found to be the most densely developed with several new blocks being finished at the time of the study along Enterprise Road in Newlands. These were not only close to each other but were multi-storey, each being four storeys high. Many families were accommodated within a small space. Another huge residential development was at the Chikurubi Support Unit Depot in Manresa. The residential complex comprises approximately 30 blocks of flats, each housing an average of 12 units and hundreds of semi-detached single-storey units. The Glen Norah Police Station is comparatively smaller with a few large multi-storey blocks and tens of semi-detached and detached single housing units.

The police flats and other residential projects have been densely developed to optimise the use of land so that they can accommodate as many officers

as possible at each site. Most of these, particularly the Tomlison project, fit well within the country's and city's densification agenda. The project's footprint is much less per unit created than the average high-density plot size of 200 square metres in Harare. They still, however, have many single-storey detached and semi-detached units that reflect less compliance to densification. The national police projects could still accommodate more of their staff if they implemented the densification policies more strictly.

Plate 3: *Several blocks of flats at Tomlison, including new blocks with red roofs* (Google maps)

Table 3: *Some Police Staff Housing Projects* (Authors, 2021)

Project Location	Type of Housing	Height
Chikurubi (Support Unit)	1- and 2-bedroom flats and detached units	4-storey flats blocks Single-storey units
Harare Prison	Flats	4 storeys
Glen Norah	Detached houses and flats	Single-storey houses 4-storey flats blocks

OLD FLATS PROJECTS

An analysis was done of the old flats projects in very old suburbs focussing on Mbare, where migrant bachelor males were housed during colonial times. These bachelor flats, commonly known as hostels, were built to accommodate people that provided labour to factories in nearby industrial areas and in the CBD of the then Salisbury (Zinyama *et al.,* 1993; Toriro, 2007).

All of these flats were walk-up flats with a maximum height of four storeys. This was likely because of the access challenges. These flats did not have electricity and so could not be equipped with elevators. These flats were massively developed and accommodated hundreds of workers and now accommodate thousands more since they are now occupied by whole families.

TRAFALGAR COURT, A TYPICAL HIGH-RISE FLAT

Perhaps the only exception in terms of the height of residential flats is the Harare City Council CBD flat known as Trafalgar Court. This is a 13-storey mixed-use building accommodating shops on the ground floor, three levels of offices and nine storeys of residential use. It is the largest block of flats with individual ablution facilities, unlike the Mbare flats that house many households but have communal toilet and bathroom facilities. According to a City of Harare Town Planner, 'this is probably the highest density of residential land use in Harare. The 13-storey block sits on a plot of land under 2000m^2.

Trafalgar Court perhaps helps explain why such huge flat projects are rare in the city. None of the elevators in the building has worked over a long period. A few residents interviewed did not remember when the elevators

last worked. One female resident responded that 'these last worked quite a long time ago'. When probed whether the long-time denoted weeks or months, she added that 'it has been years'. The officials in the Harare City Council responsible for managing the property indicated that maintaining the elevators was costly and they no longer bothered to repair them. The elevators were too old and needed to be replaced with new ones. Although they had budgeted for the replacement, they indicated that resources were never made available.

They expressed frustration with the city financial management system that did not separate revenues accruing from different sources hence even potentially viable units suffered underfunding when the allocation was done.

Plate 4: *Trafalgar Court in central Harare is probably the tallest flat at 13 storeys* (Photo credit: Percy Toriro)

DISCUSSION

The survey evidence shows that most flat developments in Harare focus on building walk-up flats. While any housing that is more than detached single dwelling houses, such as semi-detached, maisonettes or flats represent densification and must be encouraged, most such developments are not high-rise. The majority of key informants attribute this to two major factors: the high cost of elevators and the unreliability of electricity. They indicated that no elevators were locally manufactured, hence their installation and maintenance constituted a huge cost to the facilities. Many developers found it cheaper to construct walk-up flats that utilised stairs for access rather than elevators. The survey found very few high-rise flats in the whole city. The Avenues area, which is supposed to be an exclusive flats zone and is within walking distance of the Harare CBD, still has many single-storey old houses. This is so although there is a high demand for housing in Harare that remains unresolved. Even in this high-value area, the land remains underutilised. Investment in high-rise flat developments remains critically low.

Most high-rise flats in Harare were found be in bad shape. In ne of the tallest flat buildings, Trafalgar Court, and other flats, elevators were found to be out of service most of the time. At the time of data collection for the article, all the elevators at Trafalgar Court were out of order. Residents interviewed reported that the elevators had been out of service for more than two years. This was corroborated by the city property managers who said that they were finding it difficult to operate the elevators.

The study established that Harare does not have the extensive flat corridors that are found in some major cities. Flats are located in isolated areas and do not benefit from economies of scale. Dense corridors of development create opportunities for saving resources in infrastructure development. Dense populations and dense developments create opportunities for developing affordable infrastructure as the per capita cost reduces with higher numbers. The failure to properly densify and develop high-rise flats has denied Harare residents opportunities to have commuter railway infrastructure and mass bus systems. As a result, the

poor people in Harare struggle to commute conveniently or visit different areas of commerce, industry or recreation. The densification agenda is good for Harare residents in more ways than just housing, it stimulates potential downstream economic activities as it creates economies of scale, thereby unlocking the potential for developing support infrastructure.

The densification agenda in Zimbabwe and Harare has failed to develop a viable mass transport system. Harare does not have a commuter railway transit system. This is partly because there are no sufficient areas with dense populations to support the development of such systems whose viability is dependent on high numbers of users paying for the service. It also does not have a well-developed public bus system. The dispersed development model that started, motivated by racial segregation, sadly did not change at independence when racial integration was introduced. Key informants in transport planning at both central and local government levels indicated that the spatial structure of Harare has made it difficult to develop an intra-city railway system in Harare and Chitungwiza.

The failure to implement the densification agenda has resulted in a high carbon footprint in Harare. With a documented rapid growth that takes a high sprawl approach, much vegetation is lost as new land is cleared for development and agricultural land is lost, threatening the food security of the city (Tawodzera *et al.*, 2019). Much housing could be fitted within the existing boundaries of the city if the densification agenda is fully implemented. The distance from the core of the cities to the periphery could remain short if development adopted densification. Unfortunately, this has not been the preferred development option for individuals and investors, with poor environmental consequences. The many thousands of cars and buses that transport Harare residents over long distances to work, schools, hospitals and shopping centres are contributing to global warming. The carbon footprint of Harare could be much lower if housing developments were more densified, less vegetation was cleared for housing and people did not have to travel long distances to work.

CONCLUSION

The densification agenda in Zimbabwe has not been fully or seriously implemented. While the principal planning law and statutory planning documents, such as master and local plans, articulate the agenda, the practical reality does not reflect that intention. The urban development trajectory is taking a wasteful and typically sprawling typology. Even the few efforts at densification are not at a scale that demonstrates the intention to densify nor reflects the seriousness of the negative impacts of rapid urban growth. The wasteful nature of the spatial growth is disadvantaging some groups of residents in the cities. This is making Zimbabwean cities inefficient and creating difficulties in providing mass urban transport, among other challenges, thereby making movement expensive for many urban residents. The densification agenda largely remains on the drawing board and mainly in legislation and statutory plans. On the ground, there are only isolated half-hearted attempts at fulfilling the agenda. The different flat projects have fallen short of responding to the intention. The absence of large flat projects points to a generally failed densification agenda.

The densification agenda has failed in other projects that depend on high volumes of people. The poor densification implementation means that there are no viable corridors where a mass transport system can be developed. Urban development driven by urban sprawl is destructive to the environment and is self-defeating to the capacity of the city region to feed itself. With increasing food insecurity in urban areas in Zimbabwe and the rest of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region, cities and their hinterlands cannot continue to take up potential agricultural land to provide sparse wasteful types of housing and other developments.

Zimbabwean cities, as shown by the Harare examples, must re-examine their growth patterns and take corrective actions to promote compact and efficient development. They must promote the construction of more high-rise flats to curb the unsustainable uptake of urban land. There are too few examples of densification that show that a different and more sustainable option is possible. With increasing evidence of climate change and the

need to adopt the principles embedded in the NUA and the SDGs, Harare and other urban areas in Zimbabwe must urgently retrace their development patterns and refocus on the sustainable densification agenda.

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