

**THE PROBLEM OF HOUSING BACKLOG IN ZIMBABWE'S URBAN CENTRES: THE CASE OF  
GWERU CITY IN THE MIDLANDS PROVINCE**

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**ABSTRACT**

*Urban areas in Zimbabwe have been hit by a critical housing shortage. A survey was conducted in the City of Gweru. Through interviews, questionnaires, and observations it was established that rural-urban migration, Operation Restore Order ("Murambatsvina"), colonial building standards, and harsh economic conditions have contributed immensely to the increase in the housing backlog in the city. The study recommends that insurance companies should be co-opted in a bid to provide accommodation, adopt a more flexible approach to housing delivery as colonial building standards which are appropriate for middle class housing are still being applied, facilitate the operation of building cooperatives, and promote building of flats as these will help to reduce the housing backlog in the City of Gweru.*

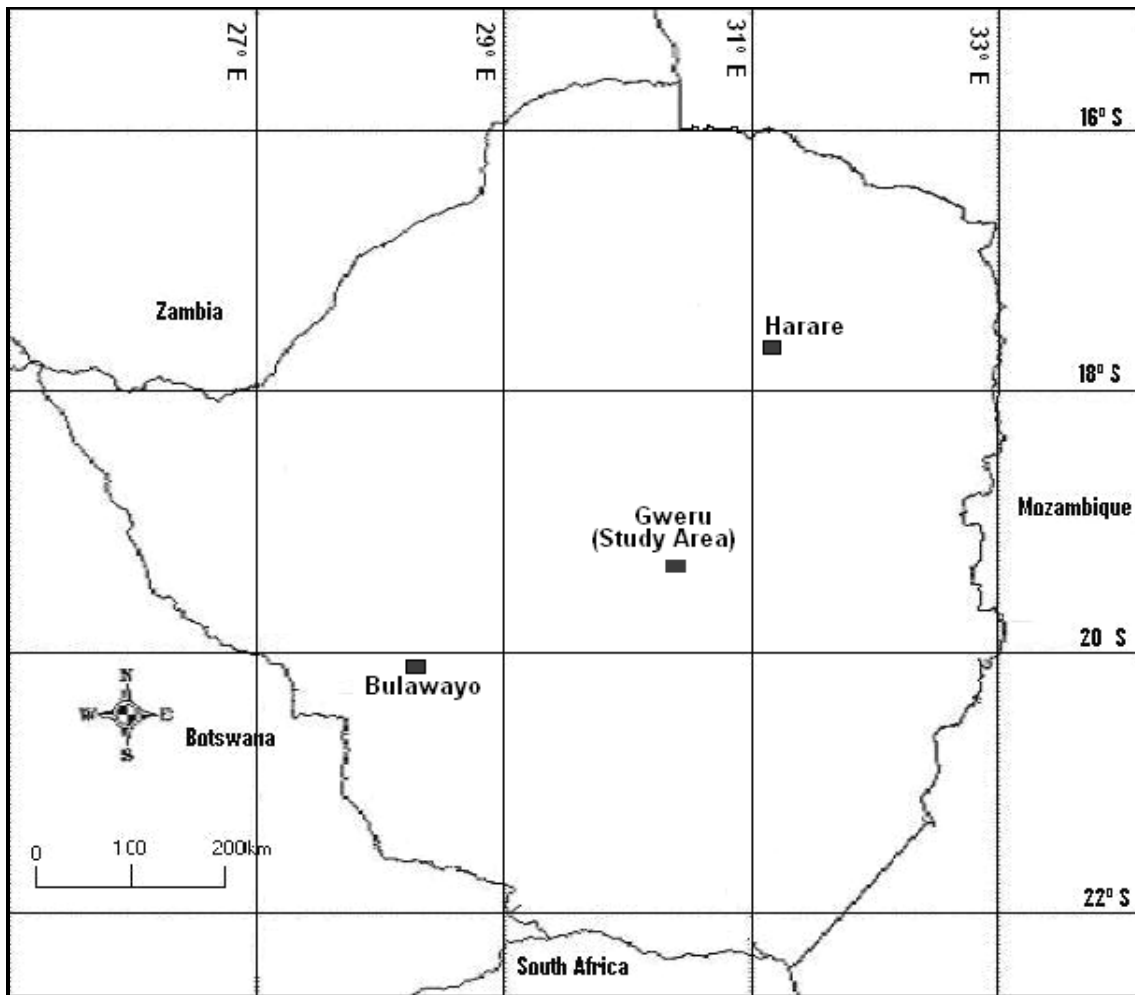
## INTRODUCTION

The City of Gweru started off as a gold mining village in 1894 and kept growing, leading to it being given city status in 1971 (Gweru Business Directory, 2000). Gweru (Fig. 1) is situated about 275 km southwest of Harare, the capital city of Zimbabwe. It has a population of 140,806 people (CSO, 2004). It comprises low, medium, and high-density suburbs. The low-density suburbs include Windsor Park, Lundi Park, Gweru East, Ridgemoor, Southdowns, Southview, Daylesford, and Athlone. The medium density-suburbs include Ivone, Northlea, Shamrock Park, and Nashville. And the high-density suburbs include Mkoba, Munhumutapa, Mambo, Ascot, and Senga/Nehosho. Just like most urban centres in Zimbabwe, Gweru is facing a critical housing problem. The survey, which was carried out in Gweru, revealed that since independence in 1980, the number of people on the waiting list has been growing annually (Table 1). Statistics used were for the period beginning in 2000 and ending in 2007. The figure rose from 9,014 people in 2000 to 14,498 people in 2007.

**Table 1: Number of People on the City Council's Waiting List**

Year	Number of People on Waiting List
2000	9,014
2001	9,516
2002	10,368
2003	11,021
2004	11,947
2005	12,486
2006	13,528
2007 (January)	14,498

**Source: Research data, 2008**



**Figure 1: The Location of Gweru in Zimbabwe**

## **BACKGROUND TO THE PROBLEM OF HOUSING IN THE CITY OF GWERU**

Zimbabwe's urban centres, including the City of Gweru, are facing a critical housing shortage (Mapira, 2001). This problem finds its roots in the colonial era. Before the 1950s, colonial legislation regarded blacks as temporary rural-urban migrants; hence, there was no need to provide them with family accommodation (Auret, 1995). However, Rhodesian towns and cities continued to grow due to the urbanization processes, so did the problem of housing (Devas and Rakodi, 1993; Chenje and Johnson, 1994; Swanepoel, 1997). In the 1950s there was a policy shift regarding black housing. For the first time, family or married accommodation was provided in the so-called black townships (Mapira, 2001). These efforts were, however, not adequate to cater for the increasing number of blacks in the urban areas. For example, in 1969 at least 56,018 houses were needed to accommodate Harare's 280,090

Africans at an average of 5 people per family. By 1975, Harare's population had risen to 420,000. At that time, there were only 42,138 housing units which housed a total of 278,400 people, leaving 141,600 either as lodgers or squatters (Auret, 1995). The total backlog at independence in 1980 was estimated at 37,000 and had risen to 150,000 by 1984 (Auret, 1995). By 2007, Zimbabwe had an estimated housing backlog of 3 million home seekers, with Harare alone having over one million people (The Financial Gazette, 2007). The housing crisis was made worse in May 2005 when the government undertook a clean up campaign in urban centres dubbed "Murambatsvina", or Operation Restore Order, which destroyed makeshift accommodation in which several residents resided (Tibaijuka, 2005).

The housing problem has become a ubiquitous phenomenon in Zimbabwe's urban centres. It manifested by overcrowding in the available houses, and emergence of slums and squatter settlements (Cornwell, 1997). It was against the scenario above that this researcher was motivated to undertake a study on housing backlog in the City of Gweru. The 2002 census revealed that, 38.86% of households owned houses, while 6.68% were tenants, 44.43%, were lodgers, and 8.42% were in tied accommodation in the City of Gweru (CSO, 2004). The objectives of this study were to determine the causes of the housing backlog in Gweru so as to come up with the bottlenecks in the shelter delivery system and thus recommend ways in which the housing backlog could be reduced in the city.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This survey was carried out in the City of Gweru between September and December 2007 for an analysis of the problems of housing backlog in the City of Gweru. Primary and secondary data sources were used in data collection. Interviews were carried out with key stakeholders who included the Director of housing from the Gweru City Council, the housing officer from the Ministry of Local Government and National Housing, officials from building societies in the city, housing cooperatives, and individuals on the housing waiting list. This was to get first hand information on the causes of the housing backlog, and, what the central and local governments were doing about the problem. Interviews sought to gather the perceptions of the tenants and lodgers concerning the problems of lack of housing. Observations were carried out in suburbs such as Ascot Extension, Mambo, Mkoba, Munhumutapa, Hertfordshire, Lot 4, Clifton Park, and Nehosho Section in Senga, to obtain the practical experience on problems faced by those who were in the process of constructing their houses. Some municipal documents on housing projects in the City of Gweru were also reviewed. These methods provided an

insight into the problems of housing backlog in the City of Gweru. The secondary data sources included the reports from the city council, which was supplemented by a critical perusal of publications, journals, and books on the topic under discussion.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Causes of Housing Backlog**

Rural-urban migration, Operation Restore Order (“Murambatsvina”), colonial building standards, and harsh economic conditions have contributed immensely to the increase in the housing backlog in the City of Gweru.

### **Rural-Urban Migration**

Urban growth in Zimbabwe has been very rapid since the late 1970s following the relaxation of the pre-independence influx control measures on people who wanted to stay in the urban area (Tevera and Chimhowu, 1998). Since then rural-urban migration has been occurring at unprecedented levels, yet government and local authorities have not been able to provide sufficient accommodation for these people.

Urbanization and rural-urban migration in the City of Gweru have been on the increase due to droughts and very little rural development. Zimbabwe experienced severe droughts notably in the 1981-82, 1983, 1986-87, 1994-95, 2001-02, and 2006-07 agricultural seasons (Chenje, 2000; The Financial Gazette, 2007). Interviews with people on the housing waiting list revealed that they came to Gweru during some of these drought years. They hoped to escape the hardships caused by droughts while simultaneously looking for remittances to send back to their families in the rural areas. The City of Gweru’s Housing Officer confirmed that squatter settlements increased in the city during the drought years.

Others argued that conditions in the rural areas of Chiwundura, Shurugwi, Chirumanzu, Gokwe, and Mberengwa have been deteriorating in the last two decades; hence, it was imperative for them to move to Gweru in search of employment, so as to improve the quality of their lives. These rural areas do not offer employment opportunities and their economies have been devastated by land degradation. This left the rural folk with reduced options except to migrate to cities in the hope of a better life. The survey

in the City of Gweru revealed that the dilemma that these people faced once they arrived in the city was lack of adequate accommodation, which has affected some of them for a long time.

### **Operation Restore Order (“Murambatsvina”)**

In May 2005, the Government of Zimbabwe instituted a clean up operation, called ‘Operation Restore Order’, but commonly known as ‘Operation Murambatsvina’ which, when literally translated means ‘no tolerance to dirt’. One of its objectives was to clear all illegal settlements and structures in the cities and towns of Zimbabwe. The operation was attributed principally to the continued enforcement of the Regional, Town, and Country Planning Act, and it had the adherence to building standards that do not recognize backyard structures, slums, and informal housing. The situation was worsened by the fact that those structures had no formally approved plans, so technically they were regarded as illegal developments. Despite the fact that they had gained popularity as an alternative form of shelter for the urban poor in both the low and high-density suburbs in the City of Gweru, backyard structures, together with Rarara squatter camps and any other makeshift structures were razed to the ground during the operation. This left scores of families homeless and some had to join the long housing waiting list. After the clean-up campaign about 2.4 million people were left homeless in Zimbabwe, and this includes the City of Gweru (Tibaijuka, 2005).

### **Colonial Building Standards**

Post-colonial state planning has not changed much in the City of Gweru. The city still adhered catechismally to the master plans and legislations of the colonial times. These have become outdated and anachronistic, as they no longer serve the purpose in present day City of Gweru, which has changed radically. The master plans are so rigid and do not tolerate informal housing, as well as certain building materials (such as farm bricks and zinc/iron sheets) for roofing. The result is that the council is unable to cater for thousands of homeless people.

However, the City of Gweru’s Housing Officer, on behalf of the city, disputed the above notion. The city argued that the city’s standards were high and not rigid. He stressed that the council changed the colonial policies and standards but ensured that they remained high. The council has actually raised standards for high-density suburbs where colonial standards were low by upgrading Munhumutapa high density suburb. The council preferred quality structures that were durable and presentable. The council

argued that some walls could be a health hazard as they could easily get damp and could also harbour fleas and cockroaches. Those walls also allowed little privacy. On those grounds the council felt they needed to maintain high standards. The building process (that is surveying, designing, and serving of stands) is very slow and helps to worsen the housing backlog in the city. The processes are also bureaucratic. Any one of the above activities has to be put to tender before any company is engaged to do the work. The red tape that is involved at the tender board does not help to reduce the problem of housing backlog. These processes can take more than 2 years before the commencement of actual building of houses. The situation is exacerbated by the fact that these processes require highly skilled manpower, and are costly to execute. According to officials from The Ministry of Local Government and National Housing, companies with the competencies and expertise to do these processes are no longer available in the City of Gweru, and had to be out-sourced from Harare or Bulawayo. This was at very exorbitant costs.

### **Harsh Economic Conditions**

According to Tibaijuka (2005), the economic decline experienced in Zimbabwe was also evident in the housing sector. Harsh economic conditions that have dogged Zimbabwe from around 1997 have made it difficult for prospective homeowners to build their own houses. Harsh economic conditions manifested themselves in the form of inflation, unemployment, low salaries, and shortage of building materials, which all negatively impacted the construction of houses. Statistics from the Zimbabwe Central Statistical Office showed that inflation had been on the upward trend since 1990 (Table 2).

**Table 2: Inflation Rates in Zimbabwe between 1990 and 2007**

Year	Inflation rate
1990	15.5
1991	23.3
1992	42.1
1993	27.6
1994	22.3
1995	22.6
1996	21.4
1997	18.8
1998	31.7
1999	58.5
2000	55.8
2001	71.9
2002	133.2
2003	355
2004	350
2005	237.8
2006	1016.7
2007	7800

**Source: Research data, 2008**

Increases in inflation have meant that building materials were priced beyond the reach of most people. The cost of finished houses also shot up, as can be seen from Table 3. Due to inflation, interest rates have continued to rise, and not many people could afford mortgage lending to buy existing properties or construct a decent home. Banks were charging exorbitant rates to cushion themselves from the harsh economic environment.

**Table 3: Cost of Houses in the City of Gweru between 2001 and 2008**

Year	Low Density	Medium Density	High Density
2001	\$2,600,000	\$480,000	\$250,000
2004	\$180,000,000	\$60,000,000	\$35,000,000
2008	\$71,000,000,000	\$35,000,000,000	\$12,000,000,000

**Source: Research Data, 2008**

A survey showed that as of February 2008, on average a four-roomed house cost \$12 billion, whilst a seven-roomed house cost \$71 billion. These figures were prohibitive and the majority of prospective home-seekers could not afford buying these houses. The situation was made worse by the fact that most people had depressed salaries. It was impossible for them to buy houses.



## STRATEGIES EMPLOYED TO PROVIDE HOUSING AND CHALLENGES MET

A number of schemes were undertaken in the City of Gweru to reduce the housing backlog. These included selling land to private developers, government sponsored programs, and selling serviced land by council to individuals. The council engaged private developers, such as building societies like Central African Building Society, Beverly Building Society, Zimbabwe Building Society, and Zimbabwe Teachers Association. A total of 6,657 stands were allocated to different private developers between 1995 and 2005 as shown below.

Area	Private Developer	Number of Stands Allocated
Mkoba (Village 15)	Beverly Building Society	245
Mkoba (Village 17)	Central African Building Society and	420
Mkoba (Village 18)	Central African Building Society and Beverly Building Society	486
Mkoba (Village 20)	Zimbabwe Building Society	350
Senga	Central African Building Society, Beverly Building Society and Zimbabwe Building Society	480
Nehosho	Central African Building Society, Beverly Building Society and Zimbabwe Building Society	545
Southview	Zimbabwe Building Society	486
Clifton Park	Mutasa Investments	345
Nehosho	Zimbabwe Teachers Association.	300
<b>Total</b>		<b>6657</b>

**Source: Research Data, 2007**

Only the Mkoba 7 and Senga schemes had been completed by the time this study was done. The rest of the schemes were caught in the economic turmoil affecting Zimbabwe from 1999 and up to the time the research was carried out in 2007. During visits to the different sites, houses were observed to be at different stages of construction. In most cases construction work had ceased completely as cost of building materials and labour were beyond the reach of those building the houses. The central government, through the Ministry of Local Government and National Housing, built a few houses and availed land to be developed for housing. A number of schemes were put in place to benefit individuals without houses of their own (Table 4).

Table 4: Houses/Stands Allocated by the Ministry from 2004 to 2007

Area	No. of Stands/Houses
Woodlands	980 stands
Senga	200 stands
Hertefordshire	1350 stands
Mtapa (Garikai I)	104 houses
Mtapa (Garikai II)	985 stands
Mkoba 15	105
Mkoba 7	90
<b>Total</b>	<b>3814</b>

**Source: Research Data, 2007**

The study revealed that in Gweru, the Ministry did not build many houses, except 105 houses in Mkoba 15, 90 houses in Mkoba 7, and a block of flats in 3<sup>rd</sup> Street. In 2004, the Ministry was involved in the Senga Access to the Home-Ownership project and 200 stands were serviced. In 2005, the central government, through the Ministry of Local Government and National Housing, was behind the developments in Mtapa (Garikai I) and Mtapa (Garikai II) schemes. These schemes were meant to benefit victims of Operation Murambatsvina. The beneficiaries developed the stands on their own. They were supposed to foot all the expenses involved in the processes (that is surveying, designing, and servicing) of the housing stands. This was no mean task as many schemes struggled to raise funds to have the land surveyed, designed, and serviced. The ministry's role was to provide land and manpower for facilitating servicing and development of stands. The ministry also mobilized home seekers and financial resources.

### **Housing Cooperatives**

Housing cooperatives have played a significant role in providing houses to the homeless in the City of Gweru. Both the city council and the Ministry of Housing have in the past worked with cooperatives in alleviating housing shortages in the city. Interviews with housing officers from the city council and the ministry revealed that cooperatives had the advantage that members pooled resources together, thereby, enabling those individuals who otherwise would never have been able to afford houses on their own.

However, cooperatives could not effectively deliver houses to their members due to a number of problems. They had limited resources, such as building materials (cement, bricks, and roofing materials). They also did not have adequate financial resources. Furthermore, there was lack of

transparency with embezzlement of funds being rampant in most cooperatives. Most cooperative leaders lack the necessary administrative and financial skills, needed in running cooperatives. As a result, cooperatives have collapsed and in Gweru, only two cooperatives successfully built and delivered houses to their members by the time of this study, which were the Dzavadzedu Housing Cooperative in Senga High Density Suburb, and Public Service Workers' Cooperative in Ascot High Density Suburb.

### **The Role of Gweru City Council**

It has always been the responsibility of the city council to build houses for its citizens. However, this has since changed. The housing officer revealed that over the years, Gweru City Council built affordable houses in the high-density suburbs of Mkoba, Mambo, Senga, and Munhumutapa for the residents. As from 1989, it scaled down the building of houses, and in 1995, it stopped completely (Table 5).

**Table 5: Number of Houses by Gweru City Council between 1985 and 1995**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Number of New Houses Built</b>	<b>Waiting List</b>	<b>Percentage of Houses Built Against Backlog</b>
1985-86	1800	6482	27.8
1986-87	2100	5003	42
1987-88	2430	4839	50.2
1988-89	3032	5726	52.7
1989-90	1350	4287	23.6
1990-91	1180	5110	23.1
1991-92	1200	6038	19.9
1992-93	1050	7581	13.9
1993-94	950	8206	11.6
1994-95	800	9834	8.1

**Source: research data, 2008**

The council cited financial constraints, inflation, and lack of central government support as the main reasons why it no longer builds houses for residents. Instead the council now either sells serviced stands, or had residents joining the pay-for-your-house scheme, which was a cost recovery approach. It also engaged interested stakeholders, such as local companies (Zimglas, Sino-Zimbabwe, Unki Mine), parastatals (Zimbabwe Revenue Authority, Zimbabwe Development Fund, and Midlands State University), building societies, cooperatives and Non-Governmental Organizations (Housing People of Zimbabwe and Heifer Project) who developed stands and sold these or allocated them to their membership.

The council directly sold 475 low-density housing stands in Randolph Park in 2007 to individuals purportedly to be on the waiting list. They ranged between 2000m and 7000m and the cheapest cost was \$400 million. These were very expensive and beyond the reach of many. Since the council did not have a policy that barred people from outside Gweru from buying stands. The housing officer insisted that all Zimbabweans had the right to own property in a town or area of their choice, as long as they could afford it. Effectively people from outside Gweru bought most of the stands. This meant the would-be beneficiaries (that is people on the waiting list) did not benefit from these schemes.

Although flats could go a long way in alleviating housing shortages in Gweru, the council did not have plans to construct these. Council argued that flats create an unpleasant social environment. They lack privacy. The housing officer said dependence on rented accommodations negated the spirit of empowerment and ownership. He further argued that experience showed that rented accommodations, especially public, was not well looked after so it deteriorated fast. He went further to say that flats had a negative social impact on children and that flats were a necessary evil where there was a shortage of land for construction of residential accommodations. Council, therefore, did not consider the flats as essential in the delivery of accommodations to its residents.

The municipal efforts were also affected by inflation. It negatively impacted the housing backlog in the City of Gweru. Southview Housing Scheme, for example, was randomly sampled as a case study on the problems bedeviling housing projects in the City of Gweru in general. A number of observations were made. Southview was initiated in 2004, and 189 stands were sold to prospective homeowners. The City Council expected the houses to have been completed by 2009, but the situation on the ground showed that only 26 houses had been completed by end of 2007. The rest were at different levels of construction as shown in Table 6.

**Table 6: Level of Development in Southview Stands**

<b>Level of development</b>	<b>No. of houses</b>
Undeveloped	60
Slab Level	22
Window Level	44
Roof Level	37
Complete	26
Total	189

**Source: Research Data, 2008**

From the discussions held with the stand owners, it was revealed that inflation was the biggest drawback on the construction. They mentioned that because of inflation they could no longer afford to buy building materials, such as cement, bricks, window, and doorframes. A similar scenario was observed in the suburbs (such as Nehosho, Ascot Extension, Garikayi/Hlalani Kuhle Scheme, Mkoba, and Senga) where building activities were almost at a standstill.

In 2004, a total of 651 stands were sold to individuals in the residential areas of Southview, Rundolph, Mkoba, Senga, and Ascot. From the interviews carried out with the City Council, it emerged that, of the 651 stands, 178 were repossessed, as the individuals could not afford to develop the site within the stipulated period of 2 years. It was also discovered that not all the individuals were managing to complete the houses within the given time. This meant that there was no reduction in the housing backlog, as stands were re-possessed. The individuals will still remain lodgers and on the waiting list.

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The conclusion that can be drawn from the study is that the housing problem in Gweru is a mammoth one that dates back to the colonial era. Most people in the city are lodgers and pay exorbitant rents to the landlords who may not be sympathetic to the plight of home- seekers. Though the council has come up with a number of measures to ameliorate the housing problem, more needs to be done to eradicate the problem permanently. A number of recommendations can be made on how the housing problem can be confronted, including the following:

- Local authorities should cede out land to insurance companies, pension funds, and other land developers in exchange for investment in land development, servicing of stands, and construction of houses. Outside the banking system, pension funds, provident funds, and insurance

companies form the largest financial system; hence, there is a need to harness their resources towards housing delivery initiatives. In any case, most employees contribute to statutory pension funds, such as the pay-as-you-go pension schemes, so there was need to channel a percentage of their funding towards the construction of new housing stock for the contributing employees.

- Housing cooperatives, which remain underdeveloped yet they have proven ability to cater for low-income groups, should be given funds once their land is fully serviced.
- There is need to revamp the housing development chain (that is from land surveying, land servicing, and housing construction) including water and sewage reticulation to end housing challenges.
- The council should construct storey flats, as these house more people yet they require less land than detached houses. Flats could be adopted for middle and low-income housing. This approach was used in Ukraine and it proved to be a lasting solution and viable solution. In Zimbabwe, these are still common in Matapi-Mbare; Senga in Gweru (Madzingira et al, 2002).
- There is need to adopt a more flexible approach to housing delivery which suit the majority of population who are poor and in low income bracket. Use of wooden or precast-wall makeshift houses could go a long way in alleviating the housing problem.
- The classical and rigid master plans, which are often unrealistic and rather technocratic and too expensive to implement, should be done away with. Managing and planning of urban development should also be compliant with best practices around the world.

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