

Zimbabwe: Will new housing policy address agony of home seekers?

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While government has sought to avail public land for pro-poor housing schemes in such areas like Whitecliffe and Budiro, beneficiaries, particularly civil servants are finding it hard to build proper accommodation facilities. Urban migration has led to many of them living in dilapidated cabins.

David Chambare is a 49-year-old civil servant who has for many years been moving from one homestead to the other. He lives in Harare and rented accommodation in low, middle and high density suburbs.

He is desperate for his own roof - as the 'cat and mouse' affair with landlords, whereby he has to comply with all of their demands, no matter how absurd, is now proving difficult to stomach.

Chambare is not alone in such a predicament as the shortage of affordable housing in the capital affects thousands of people. But his situation is exacerbated by the fact that he joined the teaching profession in 2006 when salaries of civil servants were far below the poverty datum line.

"We lived through hell during the hyperinflationary era when salaries could hardly put food on the table for our families, let alone buying a house," said Chambare.

According to David Munyoro, permanent secretary for the National Housing and Social Amenities Ministry, government stopped providing houses in 2002 due to economic difficulties – resulting largely from the collapse of the agricultural and manufacturing industries and massive brain drain.

"There has been little construction by government since 2002. The adoption of the multiple currency regime saw things improving a bit and this year we managed to build the Willowvale Flats," Munyoro said. But demand for housing is still high, and community-based co-operatives have sprouted as a result.

"I have been a member of a housing co-operative where I am paying quite a substantial amount. But the fact that very few activities are happening on the ground leaves me with very little hope of owning a house," says Pretty Mulindazo, a teacher at Seke 4 Secondary School in Chitungwiza.

Many desperate civil servants have fallen prey by bogus housing trusts, with the latest being that of controversial musician Energy Mutodi, Chief Executive Officer of ZIMTRUST housing trust, which is embroiled in bitter wrangle with members who want their money back.

The City of Harare recently acquired more than 25 farms around the city for housing, which has been interpreted as a positive move meant to address concerns of its backlog of over 500,000 home-seekers.

Munyoro called for the resuscitation of municipal bonds by Harare City Council. “We must transfer the administration of state land to local authorities. The process of housing delivery may be quickened by decentralizing planning approval from local authorities like Harare City Council, which has a tendency to sit on plans,” he said, adding that informal housing co-operatives should be formalised and given funding.

“As a ministry we should accommodate all housing efforts by providing technical information and advice to people involved in the provision of housing. Section 8 of the census questionnaire will inform us on statistics around the housing needs both in rural and urban areas,” Munyoro added.

What the people say

The government of Zimbabwe recently adopted a social housing policy aimed at rolling out mass housing schemes for low-income earners. But people are sceptical about it –given so many disappointments in the past.

“It’s a policy that we had always hoped for but the proof of the pudding is in the eating, so there should be no tendency to make noise before the implementation. In the past good policies have been passed – but gather dust on the shelves,” Tarisai Maringire, Epworth.

He went on to cite the example of the Distressed Companies Fund that is still to be implemented. Most companies in Harare and Bulawayo are still closed despite the euphoria surrounding the fund.

“The situation of lack of decent accommodation in Hatcliffe is dire so I urge the policy makers to hasten to address this. The policy should quickly address the situation in this sprawling suburb where most of the victims of Operation Murambatsvina are still temporarily housed.

“We have housing schemes that are in serious need of service provisions like electricity, water supply and reticulation and funding of these projects should be done as soon as possible to curb the incidence of disease,” said Robert Domboka, Hatcliffe.

“Most people here opt to continue squatting as they still bear the ugly scars of Murambatsvina, so there is the need to convince them that normalisation of the housing sector will be addressed by this policy,” he added.

Security of tenure is still very tenuous. The most recent case is of 1,000 families who were ordered by the High Court to vacate residential stands which they had purchased from Justine Zvandasara, which has left the residents devastated.

In Harare South, which is home to many housing co-operatives and is under Zanu PF’s Hubert Nyanhongo, many home-owners who spoke to this paper said they would like the new policy to assure them of property security.

“We have been in trouble for not attending ZANU PF rallies with threat of evictions being mooted for failure to comply. So the national housing policy should quickly address the situation here because some of us fear losing our homes.

“With the elections looming there is the possibility of ZANU PF cowing people into submission by threatening us with eviction again,” said a man, who only identified himself as Trevor for fear of victimisation.