Gaborone housing crisis continues to bite

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A Ledumang resident who has been renting a guest-wing within a yard for the last four years has a litany of complaints against her landlord that epitomises the housing crisis in the nation's capital city.

The tenant, who prefers anonymity for fear of further victimisation, told Mmegi in an interview that her complaints range from faulty areas in the house, such as the hole in the master bedroom's ceiling and the malfunctioning bathroom plumbing system - to problems of what she feels are unwarranted rent hikes. The latest problem has however left her in a state of paralysis.

"Towards the end of February the landlord told us that somebody new would be moving into the main house at the beginning of March. Later, he sent me an SMS saying we should be out of the guest wing around March 14th or 15th," she said.

While she said that she dismissed the text message, telling the landlord that such matters were better discussed "face to face, she and her husband are now desperately looking for a house. She said they have been unhappy with the landlord's communication skills, saying he makes decisions that involve them without consulting them, his justification, whenever they talk to him about it, is that the house belongs to him. She also said that she feels the quality of the house does not warrant the periodic rent hikes, as there have been no major developments.

"We haven't been happy living here all these years but it is not easy to find a house in Gaborone. As soon as we find something better, we will move out," she said.

Undoubtedly, such sentiments of helplessness are common all over Gaborone as the shortage of accommodation in the capital city continues to bite. Gaborone is often described as one of the fastest growing cities in Africa - south of the Sahara, with a population of around 250,000 in 2010, a big leap from the number of people who lived here during the independence era. Post-independence, a need to seek non-traditional ways of earning a living has sparked a rural-urban drift, resulting in a severe accommodation problem in Gaborone.

In 1990, in his paper titled "An Evaluation of Physical Planning Strategies and Programmes for Housing the Urban Poor in Botswana," Alexander Clement Mosha wrote that in their early years, most developing countries had been lax about meeting their people's housing needs.

"Squatter settlements and other forms of illegal housing development were considered transitory forms of shelter which could be replaced by conventional housing once national economies developed," he wrote. Old Naledi, the oldest Gaborone settlement, is a case in point. It began in the early 1960s as a squatter compound for people coming to seek employment at construction and industrial projects in the new capital and before long its population was too big for successful relocation.

However, as early as 1971, the government had recognised a need for addressing people's housing requirements, with the establishment of the Botswana Housing Corporation (BHC), whose mission was to provide housing for government and local authorities, as well as the subsequent 1978 introduction of the Self- Help Housing Agency (SHHA), a programme meant to give low-income households access to affordable housing.

However, the BHC has largely failed to meet demand for houses, with, until some years ago, a notoriously long waiting list that the corporation public relations officer, Tefo Kebabope told Mmegi was "unsustainable and tedious to manage".

In a response to an Mmegi questionnaire, Kebabope said the corporation discarded the waiting list system at the end of 1996. "People stayed for more than 15 years on the waiting list, some died [while] on the waiting list, parents put children who could not afford to buy or rent a house. It complicated the credit vetting process and escalated beyond the delivery of housing projects," he said.

The SHHA programme has also had limited success. Many Gaborone residents have therefore, been left with no choice but to rent houses. However, even in this regard tenants are vulnerable to houses whose quality and rentals are largely unregulated. In Gaborone, you can lease out anything from a one-room in the so-called 'train-houses' that are common in Tlokweng and Mogoditshane to a mansion in Phakalane.

Rentals range from around P300 for an unelectrified room in Old Naledi to P25,000 for a five-bed roomed double-storey house in Phakalane. Responding to a questionnaire from Mmegi, M. B Tumagole, registrar with the Real Estate Advisory Council (REAC), said: "Currently, the government does not have any regulatory or legislative framework in place to determine the standard or quality of houses to be leased or rented out."

Tumagole said the government also does not have any framework in place to control rentals. Outule Bale, president of the Real Estate Institute of Botswana (REIB), who is also an asset manager with Khumo Property Asset Management, said while he admits that there is a housing crisis in Gaborone, with rentals very high, that the real estate industry in Botswana functions within a free market economy.

"Prices are set by forces of demand and supply. It's not somebody's doing. Supply of houses is limited, while demand is high," he said. Bale said the reason the supply of housing is this low is because of a myriad of reasons, including the slow pace of servicing land, as well as the lack of mixed-use developments in our society.

"We need to move into developments where if there is a block of flats you could maybe have your apartment directly above your workplace," he said. Bale said this would save government money because there would be a sharing of resources. He said they are currently pushing for this vertical, as opposed to sprawling, growth of cities and towns. On the question of quality control, Bale said the first people who should regulate the quality of buildings are the engineers at the city council.

"They standardise the construction process. They have the ultimate control or authority on what can be built."

Bale also said people should appreciate that in Botswana there are distinctions between housing standards, like low-cost, medium, high-cost and SHHA. "Low-cost houses are not necessarily expected to have the same amenities as high cost housing," Bale said.

While the Ledumang tenant has complaints about her landlord, for other tenants in Gaborone, their battle is in dealing with unregistered real estate agents, as in the case of 26-year-old Masego Jeremiah who recently took her estate agent to the REAC after he refused to refund the security deposit balance due to her, only to discover that he was unregistered to practice.

Tumagole of REAC admits that they are struggling with a proliferation of fly-by-night estate agents. "To this end we have embarked on an education drive to the nation to teach them about the dangers of dealing with unregistered agents," he said.

Tumagole said any real estate agent, who practises without being registered, would be liable to a fine not exceeding P50,000 or to imprisonment for a term not exceeding three years. Meanwhile, the Minister of Lands and Housing, Nonofo Molefhi, yesterday presented before Parliament a budget proposal for his ministry asking for P394 million for his development budget, which he said would mostly be utilised for completion of on-going projects, power reticulation of completed land servicing projects and on the SHHA development programme.