



Towards a Gender Equitable and Transformative Social Policy on Housing in Burkina Faso

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Executive Summary

Housing has long been a critical yet unresolved issue in Burkina Faso. From the colonial period through independence, the revolutionary era, and the current reliance on public-private partnerships, housing policy has consistently marginalised the poor, women, and informal workers. Despite successive reforms, social housing has largely benefited mid- and upper-level civil servants, leaving the majority of the population reliant on informal settlements marked by insecurity, poor sanitation, and social exclusion. The historical trajectory of Burkina Faso's housing sector reveals how colonial policies entrenched segregation and neglected African housing needs. Post-independence governments also pursued limited construction initiatives that favoured state employees. The revolutionary period of the 1980s marked the most ambitious housing reforms, with mass land allocations and regulated rents, but these efforts still privileged salaried workers. Since the 1990s, liberalisation and structural adjustment have deepened inequalities, as the state shifted responsibility to private developers through public-private partnerships. This approach has enriched real estate companies while excluding the poor and exacerbating displacement.

Today, Burkina Faso faces a compounded housing crisis. Eligibility criteria tied to income and credit systematically exclude informal workers and the most vulnerable households. Housing policy remains gender-blind, leaving women without equitable access to land or financing. Weak regulation allows speculative practices by developers, while large-scale projects often displace communities without rehousing. The escalating insecurity and mass displacement of populations since 2016 have further strained the housing sector, making the inadequacy of current approaches starkly visible. To address these challenges, housing policy must be redefined as a tool for equity and transformation. This calls for a gender-responsive and inclusive approach that prioritises low-income and informal sector households, strengthens regulation of developers, and ensures displaced communities are not left behind. Innovative financing models, progressive subsidies, and the promotion of local, sustainable building materials can help expand access. By centering equity and gender in housing policy, Burkina Faso can move beyond exclusionary models and lay the foundation for healthier, safer, and more resilient communities.

Introduction

Over the past two decades, African societies have been shaken by multiple crises that have deepened social inequalities. From the harsh austerity measures of the Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) in the

1990s to the devastation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic in 2019, the ability of African states to provide social protection has been put to the test.

Burkina Faso is no exception. The pandemic, in particular, underscored the urgent need for robust social policies, especially in sectors like housing, where inequalities are persistent.

Housing policy in Burkina Faso can be examined through the lens of path dependence, a concept that highlights how historical decisions continue to shape current policy trajectories. The history of housing policies in Burkina Faso from the colonial period to the present reveals a pattern of exclusion that must be addressed. Post-independence, while various governments have initiated projects aimed at providing affordable housing, including promoting real estate investment and facilitated property acquisition, these efforts have largely benefited more well-off citizens. Consequently, housing remains inaccessible to the poor, despite well-intentioned initiatives.

This policy brief examines the historical trajectory of housing policies in Burkina Faso. It identifies persistent structural barriers and proposes recommendations for a more gender-responsive, inclusive, and transformative housing policy.

Methodological Approaches

A qualitative approach was used, combining desk research with the analysis of policy documents, legal texts, evaluation reports, and archival materials. This allowed us to trace the logic behind the design and implementation of housing policies over time and to assess their social equity impacts.

Historical Trajectory of Housing Policy in Burkina Faso

1 Colonial Period (pre-1960)

Colonial urban planning prioritised resource extraction and the comfort of colonial administrators therefore housing for Africans was marginal and inadequate. For example, between 1926 and 1949, only 20 units were built under the Office for Low-Cost Housing (10 in Ouagadougou, 10 in Bobo-Dioulasso). During this period, urban development entrenched spatial and social segregation, producing a dual city structure that excluded the majority African population.

2 Independence to 1983

Following independence in 1960, rapid rural-urban migration strained inadequate housing infrastructure.

Key Points

- **Housing policies in Burkina Faso have historically excluded the poor:** From the colonial era to the present, eligibility rules tied to income and credit have systematically marginalised low-income and informal sector households.
- **Public-private partnerships have favoured developers over citizens:** Weak regulation has allowed speculative practices, enriching real estate companies while failing to expand access to affordable housing.
- **Displacement without rehousing deepens vulnerability:** Urban renewal and estate construction often push low-income communities into precarious, unplanned settlements with poor infrastructure.
- **A transformative housing policy must be inclusive and gender-responsive:** Expanding access requires pro-poor eligibility criteria, stronger regulation, innovative financing models, and durable solutions for displaced populations.

Pilot initiatives, such as the Cissin project in Ouagadougou, experimented with low-cost housing and use of local materials, but ultimately failed to reach the poorest. Housing policy primarily targeted civil servants and professionals, consolidating privilege rather than promoting equity.

3 Revolutionary Period (1983–1995)

The National Council of the Revolution (CNR) launched the most ambitious housing reforms in Burkina Faso's history. Policies included rent caps, mass land allocation under the slogan "One household, one plot," and construction of socio-economic housing. Between 1983 and 1986, over 58,000 plots were distributed in Ouagadougou and Bobo-Dioulasso. Despite this progress, salaried workers and the middle class remained the primary beneficiaries. Disadvantaged groups, including women, informal workers, and rural migrants, were sidelined, and displacement from informal settlements worsened urban inequality.

4 Liberalisation and Public-Private Partnerships (1995–present)

Adoption of Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) marked the withdrawal of the state from direct housing provision. From 2005 onwards, policy increasingly relied on private real estate developers and public-private partnerships. Initiatives such as the 10,000 Housing Programme and the National

Housing Construction Program (PNCL, 2015) promised inclusivity but, in practice, subsidised housing went primarily to middle-and upper-level civil servants. Housing selection criteria, particularly income thresholds and banking requirements, systematically excluded informal sector workers. Real estate companies benefited disproportionately, often through access to cheap land that was later resold at inflated prices.

5 The Current Crisis Context

Since 2016, insecurity and forced displacement have profoundly reshaped the housing crisis in Burkina Faso. More than two million internally displaced persons (IDPs) now require emergency shelter and services, yet formal housing programmes remain inaccessible to them. The structural exclusion of vulnerable populations from “social” housing has become even more visible and urgent.

Persistent Barriers to Inclusive and Equitable Housing

Housing policy in Burkina Faso continues to face several entrenched challenges that undermine the state’s capacity to deliver on its social mandate. The first is the systematic exclusion of poor and informal workers. Current eligibility criteria rely heavily on stable income and access to formal credit, requirements that automatically disqualify the majority of households who live on low or irregular earnings. As a result, those most in need of decent housing remain shut out of so-called social housing programmes.

This exclusion is compounded by the gender blindness of housing policy, where women face multiple layers of discrimination, from limited access to land titles to the lack of affordable financing options. Despite their central role in sustaining households, women continue to encounter barriers that prevent them from securing adequate housing for their families.

At the same time, weak regulation of real estate developers has allowed speculative practices to flourish. Developers often profit from cheap land allocations and resale at inflated prices while failing to meet social obligations or deliver affordable housing. Instead of serving as partners in development, many private actors have capitalised on loopholes to prioritise profit over equity.

The problem is further aggravated by the displacement of low-income communities. Urban renewal projects and estate construction have frequently resulted in the eviction of residents from precarious neighborhoods, without sufficient measures to ensure their rehousing. This has intensified the vulnerability of the poor, pushing them deeper into informal settlements with inadequate infrastructure and services.

Finally, Burkina Faso’s increasing reliance on public-private partnerships has reinforced these inequalities. While intended to compensate for the state’s limited resources, these partnerships have overwhelmingly favoured property developers. This current model has thus undermined the very goal of social housing, which is to guarantee equitable access to decent shelter for all citizens.

Conclusion

Burkina Faso’s housing policies—whether under colonial rule, post-independence governments, revolutionary regimes, or liberal reforms—have consistently failed to prioritise the poorest. Housing in Burkina Faso during colonial rule was largely neglected by the colonial administration, which prioritised providing adequate accommodations solely for themselves and administrative officials. This tendency persisted under the administration of the independent state, which adopted a cautious social housing policy limited to sporadic, targeted construction campaigns across different regimes. Thus, while the colonial era was defined by the failure of urban planning, the post-independence period was marked by the lack of implementation of a comprehensive social housing policy.

Clearly, so-called social housing policies remain unfair and fail to achieve their objectives. They exclude the poor and favour the enrichment of real estate companies at the expense of citizens. The criteria for acquiring these social housing units, as well as their cost price, mean that civil servants of a certain standing are the designated beneficiaries of these housing units, not the marginalised. This situation pushes poor citizens towards precarious or unplanned housing areas, exposing them to unsanitary living conditions and increasing the risk of disease. Without structural change, housing will continue to serve as a driver of inequality rather than a foundation for social transformation.

Recommendations

To move towards a gender-equitable and transformative housing policy, we recommend that Burkina Faso should:

- 1 **Adopt pro-poor eligibility criteria** that integrate informal sector workers and households with low or irregular incomes into housing initiatives.
- 2 **Mainstream gender in housing policy**, ensuring that women can access land titles, affordable credit, and social housing.
- 3 **Strengthen the regulation of real estate developers**, with strict monitoring of commitments and sanctions against speculative practices.
- 4 **Introduce progressive subsidies** that lower entry barriers for the poorest households while preventing elite capture.
- 5 **Develop inclusive financing mechanisms** that target informal workers.
- 6 **Integrate housing into displacement response**, ensuring durable solutions for IDPs beyond temporary shelters.
- 7 **Promote the use of local, sustainable materials** to reduce costs, improve resilience, and support local economies.

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