

Beyond Informality: Middle-Class Urbanisation, Hybrid Governance, and Resilience Challenges in African Peripheries

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1 ABSTRACT

Africa's rapidly expanding peri-urban zones have become critical sites of urban transformation, yet dominant narratives continue to frame these spaces through poverty-centred understandings of informality. This paper challenges these framings by systematically examining the emerging role of the African Middle class in driving self-help housing developments on customary land. It draws on a systematic literature review of 32 peer reviewed studies published between 1994 and 2025, and interrogates the intersection of middle-class investment practices, neo-customary land tenure, hybrid governance arrangements, and the implications of these dynamics for urban resilience. The review reveals four core patterns reshaping the African periphery: the commercialisation and reconfiguration of traditional authority; the emergence of institutional multiplicity and fragmented planning legitimacy; the strategic but spatially fragmented logic of middle-class self-help; and the production of ecological and infrastructural vulnerabilities that undermine collective urban resilience. The paper argues for a reconceptualisation of informality that recognizes class-mediated urbanisation as a structurally significant mode of African city-making. It concludes by proposing a resilience-oriented planning paradigm grounded in engaged tenure pluralism, metagovernance, ecological protection and differentiated housing policy responses.

Keywords: Peri-urbanisation, Middle-class self-help housing, hybrid governance, neo-customary land tenure, urban resilience

2 INTRODUCTION

The 21st century is projected to be the African century of urban transformation (UNECA, 2024). Yet, the patterns and processes of this urbanisation defy conventional models, unfolding not just within city cores but explosively across their peripheries. These peri-urban zones, the contested interfaces between the urban and the rural, have become the primary theatres for Africa's urban future, characterised by dynamic complexity, institutional hybridity, and profound socio-ecological change (Sihlongonyane & Sithagu, 2025; El Kahlaoui, 2024). Prevailing policy and research paradigms, often inherited from the Global North, have historically framed urban expansion through a lens of dichotomies: formal versus informal, legal versus illegal, planned versus unplanned. Within this framework, informality is frequently conflated with poverty, marginality, and a state of exception to be remedied through formalisation (De Soto, 2000). However, a significant and growing body of scholarship on African cities reveals a far more nuanced reality. A pivotal and under-acknowledged driver of this peripheral urbanisation is the formally employed, asset-accumulating middle class (Andreasen & Agergaard, 2022; Mercer, 2024). Faced with prohibitively expensive formal housing markets and inadequate state-provided housing schemes, these households are increasingly bypassing traditional governmental and market structures. Instead, they are engaging in self-help housing on customary land, leveraging their economic capital to secure plots and incrementally build homes in peri-urban areas (Ubink & Quan, 2008; Abdulai, 2024). This phenomenon represents a critical intersection of class, tenure, and urbanisation that fundamentally challenges existing narratives. This paper seeks to synthesise and analyse the emerging evidence on this phenomenon. It poses the following central question: How is the growth of middle-class self-help housing on customary land tenure systems reconfiguring governance, spatial forms, and socio-ecological resilience in Africa's peri-urban peripheries?

3 LITERATURE REVIEW

This review synthesises existing scholarship across three intertwined domains: the definition and role of the African middle class, the complexity of the peri-urban condition, and the evolving nature of customary land tenure and informality.

3.1 The African Middle Class: Beyond Income, Towards Asset-Building and Spatial Practice

Lentz (2015) argues that the African middle class is not a monolithic entity, but a social category defined by its "struggle for belonging" and distinction, often achieved through consumption patterns, educational attainment, and investment in housing and property. For these groups, formal employment, often in the public sector or services, provides a degree of economic security, which is then channelled into asset accumulation, primarily through real estate, as a strategy to mitigate pervasive economic precarity (Andreasen & Agergaard, 2022). This asset-building imperative is a key driver of spatial practice. It transcends mere shelter; it is an entrepreneurial act of investment and a claim to social status and urban citizenship. As Mercer (2024) illustrates in Dar es Salaam, the suburban frontier is being constructed by a middle class for whom self-built housing represents a primary strategy for securing economic futures. Their practices represent a form of "upwardly mobile informality" or "informalised modernity," where formal economic resources are deployed within informal institutional and spatial frameworks to achieve security and upward mobility, a phenomenon that reflects the "anxious, insecure and ambiguous" nature of this social stratum that Melber (2016) describes.

3.2 The Peri-Urban as a Zone of Institutional and Ecological Complexity

The peri-urban interface is a dynamic, multi-faceted space characterised by intense social, economic, and environmental interactions. Academically, it is understood as a zone of "fragmented governance" (Sihlongonyane & Sithagu, 2025), "ecological risk" (Mwonzora & Hamunakwadi, 2025), and "institutional multiplicity" (Nchanji & Bellwood-Howard, 2018). Ecologically, peri-urban zones are critical yet vulnerable. They often contain essential ecosystems like wetlands, watersheds, and green corridors that provide vital services for the entire urban region. However, they are also the prime target for urban expansion. The work of Mwonzora and Hamunakwadi (2025) in Harare illustrates the tragic trade-off between "securing a roof" and "securing ecosystems," as middle-class housing encroaches on wetlands, increasing flood vulnerability. Wijesinghe and Thorn (2021) further highlight the governance challenges in managing urban green infrastructure within informal settlements of Windhoek, underscoring the disconnect between ecological value and urban land pressure.

3.3 Customary Land Tenure and the Re-invention of Informality

Customary land tenure, once considered a rural and anachronistic system, has become central to peri-urban transformation. It is not a static relic but a highly adaptive and commoditised system. Due to rising land prices, traditional leaders have been allocating land more in a market-driven manner, creating what scholars refer to as "neo-customary" land tenure (Ubink & Quan, 2008; Abdulai, 2024). This neo-customary system is characterised by the commercialisation of land transactions, often to the detriment of the original communal principles. Sumbo (2022) provides an analysis of this shift in peri-urban Kumasi, showing how the transformation of usufruct rights into marketable commodities leads to the exclusion of indigenous community members. This process creates new social hierarchies and tensions within peri-urban communities. This commodification directly challenges simplistic formal/informal dichotomies. The housing that emerges on this land is "informal" from the perspective of the state (lacking planning permission, title deeds, and compliance with building codes) but is often developed with significant formal economic capital. It represents a "formal-informal hybrid" where salaried incomes fund incremental construction on extra-legal tenure. This is evident in the work of Andreasen and Agergaard (2022), who frame urban property explicitly as a form of security for Africa's growing middle classes, a safe haven for capital investment.

3.4 Synthesising the gaps

While many studies analyse customary tenure, middle-class housing, governance, and environmental risk separately, few systematically integrate all four to investigate their interconnection and cumulative impact on urban resilience. This paper seeks to fill this gap. It argues that understanding the resilience of African cities requires a holistic analysis of how class-driven investment, mediated through hybrid tenure and governance

systems, produces specific spatial forms that either enhance or undermine the capacity of urban peripheries to adapt to social, economic, and environmental shocks. The following sections will undertake this synthesis through a systematic analysis of the literature.

4 METHODOLOGY

This paper employs a systematic literature review methodology to synthesize existing scholarly knowledge on the intersection of customary land tenure, middle-class self-help housing, and urban resilience in Africa's peri-urban contexts. A systematic approach was selected to minimize bias, enhance reproducibility, and provide a comprehensive audit trail of the literature identification and selection process. Search strings combined keywords and synonyms using Boolean operators (AND/OR) within TITLE-ABS-KEY and were restricted to literature focusing on Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa. A full list of search strings and thematic focus areas is provided in Table 1 below.

Theme	Search String (Scopus Advanced Search)	Focus/Rationale
1. Self-help housing and middle class	TITLE-ABS-KEY(("self-help housing" OR "self built housing" OR "self-building" OR "informal housing" OR "incremental housing") AND ("middle class" OR "emerging middle class" OR "formally employed households" OR "asset accumulating households") AND (Africa OR "Sub-Saharan Africa"))	Captures literature on self-help/self-built housing practices by middle-class groups in African contexts.
2. Customary land tenure and housing	TITLE-ABS-KEY(("customary land tenure" OR "traditional authority" OR "communal land" OR "land access" OR "land rights" OR "tenure pluralism") AND ("self-help housing" OR "informal housing" OR "self-built housing") AND (Africa OR "Sub-Saharan Africa"))	Focuses on the role of customary land systems and traditional authorities in enabling or shaping self-help housing.
3. Governance and peri-urban development	TITLE-ABS-KEY(("hybrid governance" OR "customary governance" OR "traditional authority" OR "municipal governance") AND (peri-urban OR "urban periphery" OR "urban fringe" OR "city edge" OR "urban expansion") AND (Africa OR "Sub-Saharan Africa"))	Targets literature on governance arrangements (customary vs. municipal) in peri-urban African contexts.
4. Resilience and peri-urban housing	TITLE-ABS-KEY(("urban resilience" OR "climate resilience" OR "ecological risk" OR "urban sustainability") AND ("self-help housing" OR "informal housing" OR "self-built housing") AND (peri-urban OR "urban periphery" OR "urban fringe") AND (Africa OR "Sub-Saharan Africa"))	Identifies studies linking housing practices in peri-urban areas with urban/climate resilience and ecological risks.
5. Informal urbanism and class dynamics	TITLE-ABS-KEY(("informal urbanism" OR "informal settlement" OR "incremental urbanism") AND ("middle class" OR "emerging middle class") AND (Africa OR "Sub-Saharan Africa"))	Highlights the intersection of class dynamics (middle class) with informal urbanism in African peripheries.

Table 1: Search strings and thematic focus areas (Source: Author's construction, 2025).

4.1 Screening process and PRISMA protocol

The review applied carefully defined inclusion and exclusion criteria to ensure the relevance and quality of the selected studies. Articles were considered eligible if they focused on self-help, informal, or incremental housing within African peri-urban contexts and engaged substantively with issues of customary land tenure, governance, resilience, or middle-class dynamics. Only peer-reviewed journal articles, books and book chapters published between 1994 and 2025 and written in English were included, reflecting both the contemporary relevance of the topic and the need for quality assurance in the sources consulted. Although the date range was set to capture a broad period, the searches ultimately produced articles concentrated within the past two decades, highlighting the relatively recent emergence and growing scholarly attention to middle-class self-help housing on customary land in Africa. Studies were excluded if they were duplicate records, if they fell outside the geographic focus on Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa, or if they did not explicitly engage with housing and land dynamics relevant to the study.

The identification and selection of studies followed the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines, which emphasize transparency, reproducibility, and rigor in review methodologies (Page et al., 2021). A total of 92 records were initially retrieved from Scopus across the five thematic search strings. After merging the CSV files and removing duplicates based on titles, DOIs,

and author details, the dataset was reduced to 67 unique records. Ultimately, 32 studies were included in the final review and synthesis. The flow of records through each stage of the process follows an adaptation of the PRISMA 2020 flow diagram template for systematic reviews (Page et al., 2021), which provides a transparent account of how the initial dataset was refined to the final body of literature analysed.

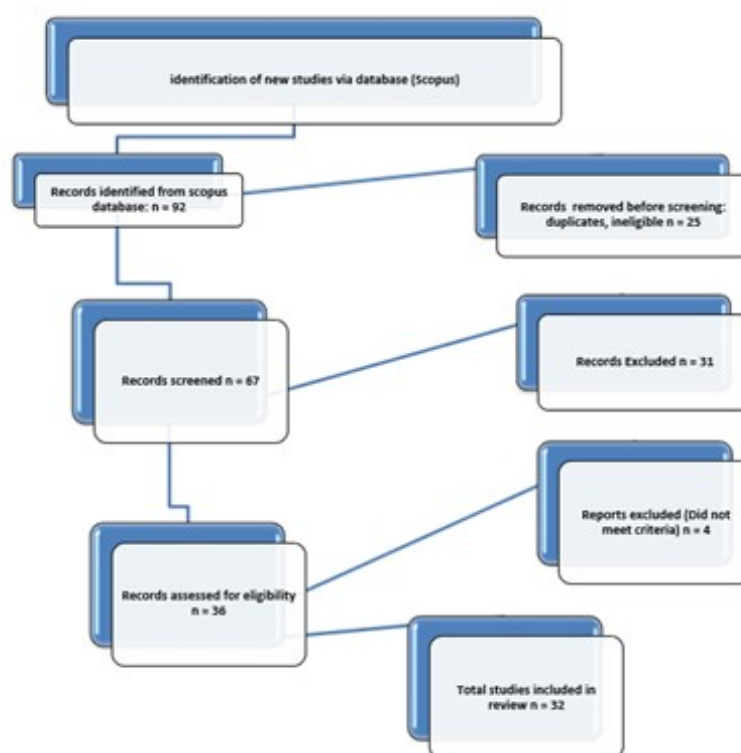


Fig 1: PRISMA Workflow diagram Source; Authors, 2025

5 THEMATIC ANALYSIS

The systematic review of the literature reveals four interconnected thematic domains through which the phenomenon of middle-class self-help housing on customary land unfolds. These themes illustrate the complex reconfiguration of authority, the emergence of hybrid systems, the distinct logics of spatial production, and the consequential challenges to urban resilience.

5.1 The Reconfiguration of Traditional Authority: From Custodians to Land Entrepreneurs

A paramount finding across the literature is the profound transformation of traditional authority structures under the pressures of peri-urbanisation. Customary leaders, once regarded as custodians of communal land heritage, are increasingly functioning as de facto planning authorities and entrepreneurial actors within urban land markets (Ubink & Quan, 2008; Simelane & Sihlongonyane, 2021). This shift is not a simple erosion of tradition but a strategic adaptation, resulting in what scholars term "neo-customary" land tenure, a system where the outward forms of custom are maintained while the underlying practices become intensely commercialised (Abdulai, 2024; Sumbo, 2022).

In Senegal, Pinard (2021) analyses the contentious consolidation of 'traditional villages' in Pikine, where chiefly legitimacy is constantly negotiated through the control of and access to peri-urban land. Similarly, Sihlongonyane and Sithagu (2025) detail the powerful influence of traditional authorities over territorial governance in Thembisile Hani Municipality, where their role in land allocation creates a parallel planning system with significant spatial implications. This reconfiguration positions traditional leaders not as relics of the past, but as central, albeit contested, figures in the urban development process.

5.2 Hybrid Governance: Institutional Multiplicity and Contested Legitimacy

The collision of traditional land administration with the purported authority of municipal governments generates a state of institutional multiplicity and fragmented sovereignty. This results in hybrid governance arrangements characterised by competing claims to legitimacy, unclear jurisdictional boundaries, and

ultimately, a planning vacuum that is filled by incremental and often contradictory practices (Nchanji & Bellwood-Howard, 2018; Sihlongonyane & Sithagu, 2025). Residents become adept at navigating this complex institutional landscape. Chitengi (2020) examines a potential cooperative model, arguing for partnerships between Lusaka's city council and customary leaders to improve land allocation governance for low-income groups. However, the more common reality is one of strategic negotiation rather than formal integration, as individuals and communities' manoeuvre between systems to secure their claims, as evidenced in the daily practices of land access in peri-urban Ghana and Senegal (Ubink & Quan, 2008; Pinard, 2021).

5.3 The Logic of Middle-Class Self-Help Housing: Security, Investment, and the Production of Fragmented Space

The engagement of the middle class with self-help housing on customary land represents a calculated, albeit often contradictory, spatial strategy. It is a practice born not from a lack of alternatives but from a rational assessment of available pathways to secure a fundamental asset within an uncertain economic landscape. Andreasen and Agergaard (2022) aptly frame this as urban property acting as "security", a bulwark against economic precarity and a tangible store of intergenerational wealth. This logic transcends the mere acquisition of shelter; it is an entrepreneurial venture into real estate, where the house functions as both home and a primary investment portfolio, a finding corroborated by Mercer's (2024) work on the "suburban frontier" in Dar es Salaam, where middle-class construction is a deliberate project of place-making and asset accumulation.

The process is inherently incremental. Unlike state or large-scale private developments, construction occurs plot-by-plot, funded through a combination of savings, formal loans where accessible, and informal financing mechanisms. This incrementalism offers financial flexibility, allowing households to respond to economic fluctuations. However, it systematically prioritises the private dwelling unit over collective urban infrastructure. The result is a distinctly fragmented urban morphology. The city expands through the aggregation of individually rational investments that collectively lack coherence, leading to inefficient land use, a lack of public space, and a critical deficit in shared infrastructure networks for drainage, sanitation, and transportation (Muthama, 2025; Sihlongonyane & Sithagu, 2025). This creates a fundamental paradox: the very act of securing individual household futures through investment in property can actively undermine the collective urban condition, producing a landscape that is ill-equipped to function as a resilient, integrated city.

Furthermore, this process is deeply embedded in social differentiation. The ability to access and develop customary land is not uniform within the broad category of the "middle class." Abdulai (2024) provides a critical lens on this, examining how "emergent neo-customary land tenure" in peri-urban Ghana creates new barriers for non-indigene smallholders. This highlights how the commodification of customary land can reinforce or create new socio-spatial inequalities, privileging those with the right connections, capital, or ethnic belonging, thereby fracturing the notion of a homogeneous middle class and revealing the exclusionary mechanisms embedded within this form of urban expansion.

5.4 Implications for Urban Resilience: Manufactured Risk and the Systemic Adaptation Deficit

The spatial and institutional outcomes described above directly and severely compromise urban resilience, constituting an active process of risk manufacturing rather than a passive vulnerability. Resilience, here, refers to the capacity of urban systems to absorb, adapt, and transform in the face of socio-ecological stresses and shocks. The development patterns driven by middle-class self-help housing systematically degrade this capacity across multiple fronts.

Firstly, the location of these settlements actively manufactures ecological risk. The pursuit of affordable and accessible land directs development towards environmentally sensitive and hazardous zones that are typically avoided by formal, regulated development. Mwonzora and Hamunakwadi (2025) offer a devastating case study of this dynamic in Harare, where the imperative of "securing a roof" for the middle class leads directly to the settlement of vital wetland ecosystems. This not only destroys the ecological functions of these areas (water filtration, flood attenuation, biodiversity habitat) but also places residents in direct harm's way, significantly increasing their exposure to flooding. This is not an unfortunate coincidence

but a direct consequence of a land market and governance system that fails to value and protect ecological infrastructure.

Secondly, the incremental, uncoordinated nature of construction creates a profound infructural vulnerability. The absence of enforceable planning regulations and the plot-by-plot development model prevent the implementation of coordinated, city-scale infrastructure. The consequences are stark: inadequate drainage systems exacerbate flood risk; haphazard road networks impede emergency services; and the lack of formal waste management leads to pollution and public health hazards, as documented by Thakur and Nel (2022) in their study of South African townships. The household-level strategy of incremental upgrading cannot compensate for this initial, systemic deficit in public works. The resilience of a city is rooted in the robustness of its networked infrastructures, and these settlements are characterized by their absence or fragmentation.

Finally, the hybrid governance context creates a critical adaptation deficit. Climate adaptation and disaster risk reduction require coordinated, anticipatory action by a legitimate governing authority. The institutional multiplicity that defines peri-urban areas means there is no single entity with the clear mandate, capacity, or accountability to perform this role. Municipal authorities may disavow responsibility for "illegal" settlements on customary land, while traditional leaders lack the technical and financial capacity for large-scale resilience planning. Wijesinghe and Thorn (2021) explicitly grapple with this governance challenge in their analysis of green infrastructure in Windhoek's informal settlements. This governance void means that even when risks are identified, such as the clear danger of building on a floodplain, there is no effective mechanism to mitigate them, leaving communities dangerously exposed. The result is a systemic failure to adapt, locking these rapidly growing areas into pathways of escalating vulnerability to climate change and other urban stresses.

6 DISCUSSION: RECONCEPTUALISING INFORMALITY FOR RESILIENT FUTURES

The systematic review undertaken in this paper elucidates a profound and complex urban transformation unfolding across Africa's peri-urban peripheries. The central paradox that emerges is that the very strategies employed by households to achieve economic security through self-built housing on customary land actively manufacture systemic risk and undermine the collective resilience of the urban regions they are joining. This discussion synthesises these findings to argue for a critical reconceptualization of urban informality and to propose a forward-looking framework for planning and policy.

This recency underscores two important points. First, it highlights the novelty of the research agenda, positioning middle-class self-help housing in Africa as an emerging field of inquiry that remains underexplored compared to more established studies on informal settlements and poverty-driven housing. Second, it points to the need for longitudinal and comparative research that can track the evolution of these dynamics over time, given that the bulk of the evidence currently available captures only the initial phases of the phenomenon. In addition to synthesizing current insights, the review highlights the importance of increasing scholarly and policy attention to the intersection of class, land tenure, and resilience in African peri-urban development by placing this paper within the framework of an expanding but still emerging body of literature.

The evidence consistently points to a core contradiction at the heart of middle-class peri-urbanisation. The practices of asset accumulation through self-help housing, while rational and often successful at the household level (Andreasen & Agergaard, 2022; Mercer, 2024), generate significant negative externalities at the city scale. The incremental, plot-based development model precludes integrated planning, leading to a fragmented urban fabric that is inherently inefficient and vulnerable (Muthama, 2025; Sihlongonyane & Sithagu, 2025). Consequently, the middle class, in its attempt to secure its own future, becomes an unwitting agent in the production of risk, ultimately jeopardising the very assets it seeks to build. The hybrid governance arrangements that characterise these zones, while offering flexible pathways to land access, represents the states limited capacity to steer urban growth sustainably. The coexistence of traditional and municipal authorities often results in a regulatory vacuum where no single entity is accountable for ensuring safety, equity, or sustainability (Nchanji & Bellwood-Howard, 2018; Simelane & Sihlongonyane, 2021). This is not a "governance vacuum" but a governed space. However, it is governed by a logic of commodification and individual transaction (Ubink & Quan, 2008; Sumbo, 2022) rather than one of public welfare and collective resilience.

7 CONCLUSION: TOWARDS A RECONCEPTUALISED PLANNING PARADIGM

The analysis presented herein necessitates a fundamental reconceptualization of urban informality and planning in the African context, where a new, resilience-focused paradigm, one that recognises informality, particularly in its middle-class incarnation as a persistent, complex, and economically significant mode of urban production. This paradigm shift begins with the explicit acknowledgement and strategic engagement with tenure pluralism. The findings suggest a need for policymakers and planners to move beyond the binary of formal versus informal tenure and instead develop frameworks that recognise customary and neo-customary systems as enduring features of the urban landscape. The objective should not be to replace these systems but to regulate them, creating mechanisms for transparency and accountability within traditional land administration to protect against the exclusionary and predatory practices that often accompany commodification, while potentially fostering cooperative partnership models between municipal and traditional authorities.

Building on this foundation of engaged pluralism, the analysis suggests a shift in the role of the state from a direct provider of planning into a facilitator and coordinator of urban development, a role conceptualised as metagovernance. This entails municipal authorities actively engaging with and steering the actions of the diverse actors shaping the peri-urban frontier, including traditional leaders, private developers, community associations, and NGOs. The goal of such metagovernance is to align these often-disparate activities towards achieving common public goals, such as ensuring equitable service provision and, most critically, safeguarding ecological integrity. Indeed, ecological planning must be repositioned from a peripheral concern to the non-negotiable core of urban planning. This requires the assertive use of planning instruments to clearly demarcate and protect ecological no-go zones such as wetlands, steep slopes, and riparian corridors from any form of settlement, a vital step in preventing the manufactured vulnerabilities documented across the literature.

Ultimately, this reconceptualized approach demands a more nuanced and differentiated set of housing policies that respond to the varied drivers of informality. The state's role in relation to the middle class is not necessarily to provide its housing directly but to create an enabling environment that channels its considerable investment potential towards more sustainable and resilient outcomes. This can be achieved by developing and enforcing clear ecological zoning plans, proactively facilitating the provision of bulk infrastructure in developing areas to pre-empt fragmentation, and promoting alternative, affordable formal housing models that can compete with the economic and accessibility allure of customary land. Planning may start to harness the dynamism of middle-class urbanization while firmly minimizing its detrimental externalities by implementing this multidimensional strategy, which prioritizes the environment, embraces pluralism, practices metagovernance, and offers diverse pathways.

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