

Towards Inclusive Urban Planning and Design: A Systematic Review on Informal Settlements in Peri-Urban Africa

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Abstract

This study systematically reviews existing literature on informal settlements in peri-urban areas, focusing on the architectural, environmental, and governance challenges that shape their emergence and persistence. Peri-urban zones, situated at the rural–urban interface, are hotspots for unregulated expansion due to rapid population growth, weak urban planning, and land commodification. Informal settlements in these areas are typically marked by inadequate housing, insecure land tenure, and insufficient infrastructure. Although socioeconomic and governance factors are well documented, the spatial and architectural dimensions remain underexplored. This review applies the PRISMA methodology to critically assess existing research, uncover key dynamics, and explore conceptual debates on informality. Findings emphasize context-sensitive governance frameworks, the role of traditional land tenure systems, and incremental upgrading strategies. This review aims to inform urban planners, policymakers, architects, and local governments in developing inclusive, resilient, and sustainable strategies for peri-urban informal settlements, addressing infrastructural and governance gaps that hinder effective urban integration.

Keywords: *Informal settlements, Peri-urban areas, Land governance, Incremental upgrading*

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Background to the Study

Informal settlements in peri-urban areas are complex outcomes of rapid urbanisation, spatial inequality, and fragmented land governance. Peri-urban zones, located between rural and urban spaces, often experience unregulated growth due to overlapping formal and informal land-use systems (Adam, 2014; Bhanye, 2023). These areas are particularly susceptible to informal settlement formation, driven by rapid population increases, inadequate urban planning, migration, and land commodification (Baye et al., 2020; Lombard, 2016). As a result, settlements in these areas often lack basic infrastructure, secure land tenure, and adequate housing.

Although often associated with low-income communities, informality is not confined to the urban poor. Studies have revealed that wealthier groups also participate in informal urban practices, such as unauthorised land acquisition or non-compliant construction (Aule et al., 2019; Azunre, 2024; Azunre et al., 2021). These challenges traditional views of informality and calls for a broader understanding that encompasses all social strata and reflects diverse urban practices. Informality extends into planning systems, labour, and service provision, often emerging through fragmented spatial patterns and weak governance. Scholars argue that informality is not just a response to urban failure but also an instrument of state power, shaped by selective regulation (Roy, 2005; Yiftachel, 2009). Consequently, understanding informal settlements requires examining both global urban theories and specific local dynamics.

While existing literature addresses several dimensions—such as socio-economic drivers (Baye et al., 2020), land governance (Lombard, 2016), and traditional institutions (Adam, 2014)—there is limited synthesis across these areas (Olaniran and Aule, 2025). Research often overlooks the architectural and spatial dimensions of informality. This study addresses this gap by systematically reviewing literature on peri-urban informal settlements, focusing on architectural, environmental, and governance variables. Through a structured bibliographic review using PRISMA guidelines, the research aims to provide insights for planners, policy-makers, and architects, promoting integrated and sustainable urban development.

Materials and Methods

This study adopted a systematic review approach to explore literature on informal settlements in peri-urban areas of sub-Saharan Africa, following the PRISMA 2020 guidelines (Page et al., 2021). The combined methodology enabled an in-depth analysis of publication trends, research methods, conceptual frameworks, and geographic distribution within the field, as presented in Figure 1. Scopus was chosen as the primary database due to its broad coverage, rich metadata, and compatibility with tools like VOSviewer, which are essential for bibliometric analyses (van Eck & Waltman, 2022; Aule et al., 2024).

PRISMA Checklist	Variable	Data
Source Identification	Database	Scopus
	Keywords	Informal AND Settlement AND Peri AND Urban AND Africa
	Search Scope	Title, Abstract, Keywords
	Search Date	September 12 2024
	Initial Materials	220 Documents
Source Screening	Exclude Books	13
	Exclude Data Paper	1
	Exclude Notes	1
	Exclude Editorial	1
	Exclude Article in Press	2
	Limit to English Language	2
Source Included	Final Materials	200 Documents
	Export	Comma-Separated Values (CSV) File
	Document	Excel Sheet
	Preference	Citation Information Bibliographic Information Abstract and Keywords References
Analysis	Bibliometrics	Documents by Year
		Documents by Subject Area
		Top Authors
	Scientometrics	Major Themes
		Variables, Methodologies and Concepts Context, Aim and Findings

Fig. 1: Systematic review approach to explore literature on informal settlements in peri-urban areas of sub-Saharan Africa, following the PRISMA 2020 guidelines

An initial keyword search using the Boolean phrase “Informal AND Settlement AND Peri AND Urban AND Africa” returned 836 records. To improve comprehensiveness, the search was expanded in stages to include related terms such as “slum,” “squatter settlement,” “unplanned settlement,” “suburban,” and “peripheral,” based on highly cited studies and related terminologies (Siddaway et al., 2019). This iterative process, according to Olaniran, Musvoto, and Aule (2024a; 2024b), helps in minimizing exclusion of relevant literature. Only peer-reviewed journal articles in English (1987–2024) were included. Books and non-journal materials were excluded due to software requirements for structured metadata. A final dataset of 200 articles was processed in Microsoft Excel and VOSviewer, enabling analyses such as co-authorship patterns, citation mapping, and keyword clustering to derive thematic insights.

Results and Discussions

This section covers results documents by year and subject area, top authors, main themes, and systematic methodologies from previous studies on informal settlements in peri-urban environments

Materials by Year of Publication

Figure 2 presents the annual progression of scholarly publications on informal settlements in peri-urban areas of Africa from 1987 to 2024. The period between the late 1980s and early 2000s shows very limited academic attention, reflecting the historical neglect of peri-urban issues in global development and urban planning discourse. This lack of early research is likely due to the dominance of rural-urban dichotomies in policy frameworks and the absence of disaggregated urban data in many African contexts (Olaniran and Aule, 2025; UN-Habitat, 2022). It also coincides with slower urbanization rates and minimal institutional focus on informal or transitional urban spaces during that time.

From around 2005, a gradual increase in research output is evident, marking a shift in urban studies toward recognizing informality and the fluid rural-urban continuum. This shift aligns with global policy milestones such as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGS) and later, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGS). Notable publication peaks in 2016 and 2019 coincide with renewed global attention to urban inclusivity and resilience through frameworks like the New Urban Agenda. A significant spike appears in 2023, with 24 publications, and continued momentum into 2024, driven in part by the COVID-19 pandemic, which exposed vulnerabilities in informal settlements (Carrilho & Trindade, 2022). This has led to a focus on themes such as land governance, service delivery, and health access.

Although peri-urban expansion intensified across Africa during the 1990s and early 2000s, scholarly output remained sparse. This can be attributed to limited academic infrastructure, donor-driven research agendas, and institutional weaknesses (Boamah & Amoako, 2020). Since 2015, however, African researchers have increasingly contributed to key themes such as informal tenure, dual land governance, and incremental housing (Owusu-Ansah & Braimah, 2013; Cobbinah & Darkwah, 2017). Emerging strategies like incremental upgrading—demonstrated in Zimbabwe and Mexico—offer inclusive alternatives to forced evictions by promoting phased, community-driven improvements (Matamanda et al., 2020; Lombard, 2016). Overall, the literature reflects growing interest, yet calls for more integrated, policy-relevant research to guide urban planning in sub-Saharan Africa's rapidly changing peri-urban zones.

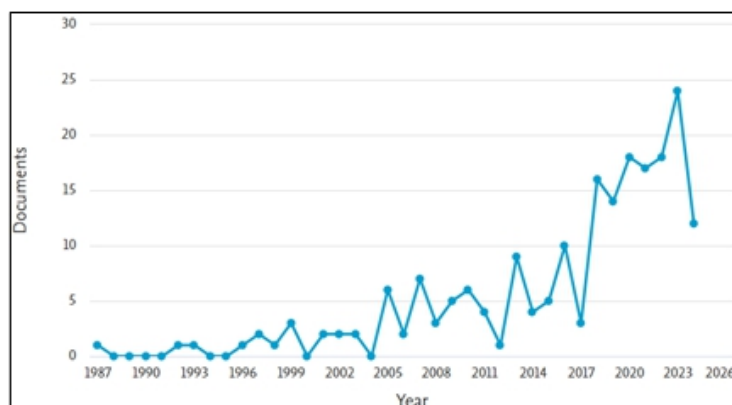


Fig. 2: Annual progression of scholarly publications on informal settlements in peri-urban areas of Africa from 1987 to 2024

Materials Distribution by Subject Area

Figure 3 illustrates the distribution of research by subject area, highlighting the interdisciplinary nature of studies on informal settlements in peri-urban Africa. The majority of publications fall under Social Sciences (119 documents) and Environmental Sciences (85 documents), reflecting a strong focus on themes such as poverty, inequality, community resilience, and environmental vulnerability. These areas intersect with debates in development studies that explore the links between socio-spatial exclusion and ecological risk in urban peripheries (Myers, 2011; Watson, 2020). Social Science literature often addresses participatory governance, land rights, and informal tenure, while Environmental Science research emphasises challenges like water scarcity, land degradation, and climate adaptation (Aule et al. 2022, 2022a; Carrilho & Trindade, 2022).

Other disciplines also contribute meaningfully. Medicine (39 documents) and Agricultural and Biological Sciences (22 documents) reflect increased attention to public health and food security in rapidly urbanizing areas. The COVID-19 pandemic brought heightened focus to the health vulnerabilities in informal settlements, where limited WASH infrastructure exacerbates risks (Smit, 2021). Agricultural studies highlight the land-use conflicts between urban expansion and peri-urban farming (Aule et al., 2022b, 2024; Tacoli & Agergaard, 2017). Smaller but notable contributions from Energy (16 documents), Business (15 documents), and Engineering (12 documents) point to emerging interest in infrastructure, livelihoods, and off-grid energy solutions. However, much of this technical work lacks integration with the socio-political realities that shape informal urban development.

Significantly underrepresented are disciplines such as Architecture, Urban Design, and the Built Environment. Despite the spatial nature of informal settlements, few studies address their physical form, self-built morphology, or vernacular planning strategies (Boanada-Fuchs, Kuffer & Samper, 2024). This gap limits the development of context-sensitive upgrading approaches. Lessons from Latin America and Asia show that incorporating design perspectives—like modular planning and site-sensitive interventions—can produce scalable, participatory solutions (Lombard, 2016; Matamanda et al., 2020), a direction still underexplored in the sub-Saharan African context.

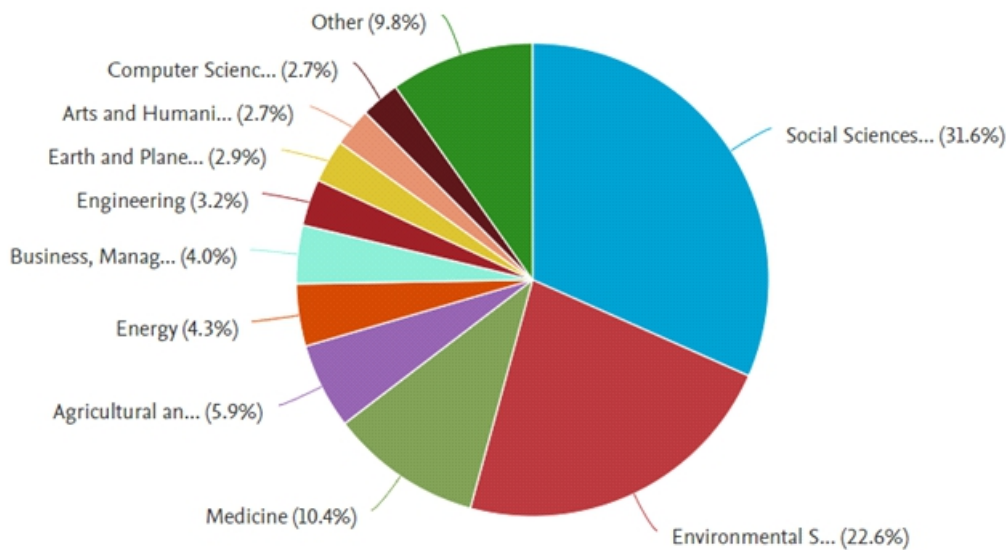


Fig. 3: Research distribution by subject area, highlighting the interdisciplinary nature of studies on informal settlements in peri-urban Africa

Major Themes on Informal Settlements in Peri-Urban Areas

The keyword analysis presented in Figure 4 offers insight into the major thematic areas shaping current research on informal settlements. Dominant clusters revolve around concepts such as Urbanism, Settlements, Humanism, and Health. While these themes reflect a breadth of scholarly engagement, they also reveal noticeable gaps, particularly in the domains of urban planning and housing. Within the Urbanism cluster, there is a conspicuous lack of emphasis on urban planning and spatial development. Keywords associated with core planning concepts—such as "urban growth," "urban design," and "spatial planning"—appear only sporadically. This indicates a limited engagement with the physical and morphological aspects of informal settlements, despite their inherently spatial nature. As Sareen and Haque (2023) argue, such omissions suggest that informal urban development is often studied through socio-economic or environmental lenses, while its spatial logic remains understudied.

The scarcity of spatially oriented keywords suggests that issues such as land-use regulation, infrastructure layout, and community-based spatial design are not being systematically addressed in the literature. This oversight is significant, as planning and design play a critical role in shaping how informal settlements evolve and how they can be incrementally upgraded or integrated into the broader urban fabric. On the other hand, themes like Health and Humanism are more prominently represented. Keywords related to public health, social vulnerability, and human rights frequently appear, reflecting the well-established concern with inequalities and service access in these communities. While this focus is essential, Olaniran and Aule (2025) note that the imbalance between social and spatial analysis limits the development of holistic responses to informality. In brief, the keyword mapping underscores the need for more interdisciplinary approaches that incorporate urban planning, architecture, and spatial analysis. Strengthening these dimensions could provide more actionable insights

for improving the liveability and resilience of informal settlements, particularly in rapidly urbanising regions.

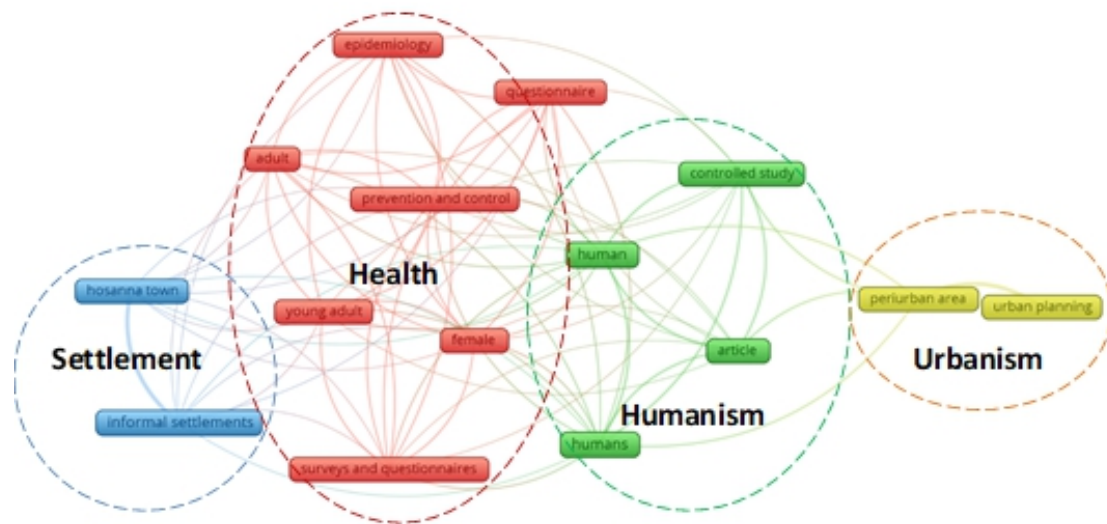


Fig. 4: Insight into the major thematic areas shaping current research on informal settlements

Systematic Review on Informal Settlements in Peri-Urban Areas

The studies reviewed in Table 1 reveal a diverse yet interconnected range of variables that shape informal settlements in peri-urban areas. Key variables span socio-economic, environmental, governance, and cultural domains. For example, Adam (2014) emphasises the role of traditional institutions and informal land acquisition processes in peri-urban land transformation, highlighting how social norms and local governance shape access to land. This has direct relevance for urban planners and local governments aiming to formalise land tenure while respecting existing social structures.

Environmental and public health variables are prominent in Aydamo et al. (2023, 2024), where water quality, seasonal consumption patterns, and sanitation access are examined. These findings are significant for health practitioners and WASH (Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene) stakeholders, as high E. coli contamination rates and inadequate sanitation underscore urgent health risks in informal settlements. Such evidence supports targeted interventions for safe water provision and public health campaigns. Economic drivers such as income inequality, high land lease prices, and inadequate compensation are central to Baye et al. (2020), pointing to macroeconomic pressures that exacerbate informal settlement growth. This is crucial for policymakers and housing authorities tasked with balancing urban expansion and equitable development. Bhanye (2023) adds a cultural lens, showing how spiritual institutions influence land access. This highlights the need for inclusive planning that accounts for non-formal authority systems.

Ecological assessments (Caro-Borrero et al., 2021) and sanitation technology adoption (Helgegren et al., 2018) reflect the complexity of infrastructural planning in these areas. Lombard (2016) and Carrilho and Trindade (2022) further demonstrate how overlapping governance systems and persistent informality challenge conventional regulatory frameworks. Together, these studies offer practical insights for stakeholders; urban planners, health agencies, environmental regulators, and policymakers by emphasizing that sustainable intervention in informal settlements must address not only physical infrastructure but also socio-cultural and institutional dimensions.

Table 1: Systematic Analysis of Research Variables, Methodologies and Concepts on Informal Settlements in Peri-Urban Areas

Author Names	Study Variables	Study Aim	Findings
(Adam, 2014)	Availability of plots for purchase, the negotiation process, the role of traditional social institutions in informal settlements, informal plot acquisition methods, plot demarcation and documentation procedures, and the characteristics of informal settlers in peri-urban areas	To investigate key actors in the informal transformation of peri-urban farmland into urban areas.	Traditional social institutions were crucial in managing peri-urban informal settlements and resolving land conflicts through social sanctions.
(Aydamo, Robele Gari, & Mereta, 2024)	Household socio-economic and water-related factors, focusing on seasonal water consumption patterns and the quality of water sources and point-of-use water; physicochemical and microbial quality of water during dry and rainy seasons, including contamination in households with piped water both on and off premises. Key factors affecting microbial contamination of stored water are identified, along with predictors of per capita water use across seasons. The study highlights challenges in ensuring safe drinking water and its impact on childhood diarrhoea.	Seasonal changes in household water use, water quality, and water provision challenges	Stored water contamination with E. coli was 43.2% and 34.5% during the dry and rainy seasons, respectively.
(Aydamo et al., 2023)	The study examines the socio-demographic profiles of households, characteristics of drinking water sources, sanitation and hygiene practices, and factors influencing access to piped water, improved sanitation, and handwashing facilities.	Drinking water, sanitation, hand hygiene facilities, and their influencing factors in peri-urban and informal settlements	Only 35.1% of households had basic sanitation, and 16.8% had basic handwashing facilities.
(Baye et al., 2020)	The study highlights income inequality, rising urban land lease prices, inadequate compensation for farmers during land expropriation, rapid urban population growth, and inefficient land allocation. It also points to a lack of affordable housing and increasing rental costs.	Key demographic and socio-economic factors driving the growth of informal settlements in peri-urban areas	Income inequality, increasing land lease prices, and inadequate compensation for expropriated land are major economic drivers of informal settlement growth.
(Bhanye, 2023)	The Nyau cult and witchcraft are examined as forms of authority.	Religion and ritual play a key role in land access and security for peri-urban migrants.	Religious and ritual-based authorities influence land issues.
(Caro-Borrero et al., 2021)	Assessment of physical, chemical, and ecological quality through sampling	Reveal the socio-ecological impacts of urbanisation and poor local governance.	The Magdalena River's ecological quality is significantly affected by increased nutrients and changes to the riparian zone.
(Carrilho & Trindade, 2022)	Identified categories include drivers and motivations, practices and challenges, negative impacts, and future trends in practice and research.	Understanding the context, challenges, practices, and their impacts is crucial for ensuring sustainability.	Informal occupation of peri-urban areas is inevitable, with varying degrees of informality always present.
(Helgegren et al., 2018)	Pour-flush toilets; Factors influencing their adoption; Groups with specific triggers or barriers; Determinants of adoption	The study seeks to explore how improved sanitation is adopted.	Pour-flush toilets were the sole favoured sanitation option at the site.
(Lombard, 2016)	Corporatist governance; Regulation for control; Varied land rights claims; Overlapping legal frameworks; Local power dynamics	Impact of land reforms on transactions at the peri-urban fringe within broader liberalisation processes.	Conflict vulnerability in peri-urban areas results from the interplay between macro-level processes and local factors, including diverse land claims.
(Thinh et al., 2023)	Mapping new settlements in the Global South; Formation of ViCs in Vietnam; Metropolitan and neighbourhood-scale urban forms.	Investigate the development of ViCs using case studies from three Vietnamese cities.	ViCs can be gradually improved and integrated into the city's broader infrastructure.

Conclusion

This systematic review examined existing literature on informal settlements in peri-urban areas to provide an integrated understanding of the socio-economic, environmental, spatial, and governance-related variables shaping their development. The findings reveal that informal settlements are not accidental outcomes of urban growth but rather products of deep structural issues, including socio-economic inequality, weak formal planning systems, and fragmented land governance. Traditional institutions and customary land systems often fill governance gaps by mediating land access and resolving conflicts where formal mechanisms are absent (Adam, 2014; Olaniran & Aule, 2025).

The study contributes to knowledge by systematically synthesizing interdisciplinary research on peri-urban informality, highlighting the underexplored spatial and architectural dimensions that existing socio-economic and environmental studies have largely overlooked. Practically, the findings underscore the need for policymakers and urban planners to adopt inclusive strategies that blend legal recognition with sustainable infrastructure development and spatial integration. Engaging traditional authorities and local communities in planning processes can foster more culturally appropriate and effective outcomes. Nevertheless, this review has limitations, including the exclusion of non-peer-reviewed and non-English sources, as well as a geographic concentration on sub-Saharan Africa, which may limit generalizability.

Recommendations

- i. Policymakers should integrate traditional land tenure systems into formal governance frameworks to bridge institutional gaps and reduce land conflicts.
- ii. Urban planners and architects should prioritise spatial and design-based interventions, including incremental upgrading strategies tailored to the physical morphology of informal settlements.
- iii. Local governments should invest in participatory planning processes that actively involve community members and traditional authorities to ensure culturally appropriate and context-sensitive outcomes.
- iv. Health and environmental agencies should collaborate with WASH stakeholders to address infrastructure deficits, particularly safe water access and sanitation, in peri-urban informal settlements.

Future research should focus on the architectural and spatial dimensions of informality, developing practical, design-led frameworks for upgrading that respond to the realities of rapidly urbanizing regions.

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