

Erika von Wietersheim

A photograph of a dry, open landscape with a windmill in the background. The foreground is a field of dry, yellowish-brown grass with some low-lying green shrubs. A wire fence runs across the middle ground. In the background, a tall, metal windmill stands against a blue sky with scattered white clouds. The windmill has a circular fan-like structure with many thin blades and a small rectangular sign attached to its side.

THIS LAND IS MY LAND!

Updated
2nd Edition

motions and emotions around
land reform in namibia

**FRIEDRICH
EBERT**
STIFTUNG

This land is my land!

Motions and emotions around
land reform in Namibia

Erika von Wietersheim



This study and publication was supported by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Namibia Office.

Copyright: FES 2021

Cover photo: Kristin Baalman/Shutterstock.com

Cover design: Clara Mupopiwa-Schnack

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced, copied or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage or retrieval system without the written permission of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung.


First published 2008

Second extended edition 2021

Published by
Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Namibia Office
P.O. Box 23652
Windhoek
Namibia

ISBN 978-99916-991-0-3

Printed by
John Meinert Printing (Pty) Ltd
P.O. Box 5688
Windhoek / Namibia
jmp@mweb.com.na



*To all farmers in Namibia
who love their land
and take good care of it
in honour of their ancestors
and for the sake of their children*

Acknowledgement

I would like to thank the Friedrich-Ebert Foundation Windhoek, in particular its director Mr. Hubert Schillinger at the time of the first publication and Ms Freya Gruenhagen at the time of this extended second publication, as well as Sylvia Mundjindi, for generously supporting this study and thus making the publication of 'This land is my land' possible.

Furthermore I thank Wolfgang Werner for adding valuable up-to-date information to this book about the development of land reform during the past 13 years.

My special thanks go to all farmers who received me with an open heart and mind on their farms, patiently answered my numerous questions - and took me further with questions of their own - and those farmers and interview partners who contributed to this second edition their views on the progress of land reform until 2020. I wish them all well for the future.

I am grateful to government ministers and officials, as well as representatives of farmers' and farm workers' unions, for their time and interest during interviews and discussions. I also thank Dr. Volker Winterfeldt of the Sociology Department of the University of Namibia and his students for their valuable input.

I would furthermore like to express my deep gratitude to friends and colleagues who helped me along while I was doing research and writing this book: Jorge Machin Labayrade and my daughter Julia who to set up numerous interviews and provided highly appreciated technical support with tape recorders and cameras; Katharina, Ursula and Neshani who accompanied me on some of my trips and were wonderful friends and persons to talk with; Dr. Lucy Steinitz, Klaus Rennack, Helga Falk and my daughters Simone and Julia who have, at one stage or another, contributed towards the development of the text by critically reading through it and providing technical support; Dr. Matthias Rick, who provided honest and insightful criticism and much needed encouragement throughout the writing of this book; Vehaka Tjimune, Festus Tjikuua, the late Neshani Andreas, and the late Reimer Thiessen who patiently answered my never ending queue of questions and discussed controversial or difficult issues, sometimes until late at night; Steve Felton who partly edited the text; and my daughter Angela who spent many hours correcting the manuscript and who provided valuable comments.



Erika von Wietersheim
April 2021

Contents

Preface to the first edition 2008	13
Preface to the second extended edition 2021.....	15
Author's Note.....	17
 PART 1: THIS LAND IS MY LAND!.....	 19
 “For sure there are strong feelings” - This study: why and how.....	 21
“I am the owner of this farm”	21
Land inside out	23
Stories instead of interviews.....	25
5,000 kilometres and 50 interviews	27
Nomenclature and bias.....	30
 Land reform so far - Leaving the past behind	 31
The heritage of the past.....	31
Too much or too little history?.....	32
The two instruments of land reform	33
“We had animals, money and experience” - A model resettlement farm	35
“We all have one aim – and that is farming” - A model affirmative action farm	41
Land reform so far	44
Further developments of land reform since 2007 until 2021	46
The need to find a forward looking approach - The Report of the Commission of Inquiry into Claims of Ancestral Land Rights and Restitution	55
 Wounded by the past - Collective memory and ‘struggle think’	 65
The prime emotion.....	66
Double dispossession.....	68
Impressions of an artist	69
A hundred years of violence	70
“Because of the struggle”	72
The inflation of the meaning of land	73
‘Struggle think’ and collective emotions.....	75
 The yearning for ancestral land - Arguing with history	 77
“We got democracy, but not the land”	78
Shattered hopes	79

Cattle, land and identity	82
Cattle and the humanness of a person.....	83
Land and ancestral graves	85
Symbolic occupation of land	86
German farmers on ancestral land	88
Attempts to understand	91
The logic of land rights	94
An end to tribal policies	95
White wounds and fears - A hundred years of gain and loss	99
Victims of changing politics	99
The first land reform in Namibia	101
Not another Zimbabwe!	102
The fear of losing one's 'Heimat'	104
Living in uncertainty	107
Coming to terms with expropriation	109
Trust in the government.....	110
Learning from the Zimbabwean experience	111
The fears of farm workers - Losers on all fronts.....	113
Content with a life without alternatives	114
A fear with a difference	116
Farm workers and land reform	117
The sensitive topic of nepotism	119
Moving beyond the black and white divide - Understanding and healing	121
Exactly the same feelings.....	122
And the other way round?	124
Acknowledgement and gratitude	125
Who is healing the wounds?.....	126
Healing at the grassroots.....	128
Why do people really want land? - Apparent and hidden motivations	131
The traditional meaning of land	132
New economy, old emotions.....	135
'Owning a farm can be a nightmare!'	136
From the political to the economic.....	138
'We cannot all be farmers'	141
The creation of new emotions	142
What people said	144
... and what I found	145

A sense of belonging	148
'Why I really want a farm'	149
A home for many people.....	150
'Then I know this is my place'	151
Different connections - From communal support to individual responsibility ..	157
The reality on the ground	158
Communal versus individual ownership of land	160
This land is my land!.....	162
Consequences for land reform	165
Many voices ... but we all speak one language	168
Which stories to tell - Some answers to many questions	171
Wounds of the past and fears of the present.....	171
Why people want land	173
Farmers and their relation with land	173
PART 2: INTERVIEWS	175
Extended Interview 1: "I would say, let us review this"	177
Nahas Angula, Namibian Prime Minister (2005 to 2012)	
Interview 2: "Owning a farm can be a nightmare"	182
Dr. Nickey Iyambo, Minister of Agriculture, Water Affairs and Forestry (2005-2008)	
Interview 3: "All citizens should have a living space"	186
Willem Konjore, Minister of Environment and Tourism (2005-2008)	
Interview 4: "We urgently need clear guidelines"	189
Mr. Harald Koch, Acting Director of Rural Water Supply: Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry	
Extended Interview 5: "The slowness of land reform is a blessing in disguise"	193
Mr. Vehaka Tjimune, Executive Director of the Namibian National Farmers Union (2006-2008) and presently Senior Policy Advisor at the GIZ (German Corporation for International Cooperation)	
Interview 6: "Land reform is basically a class issue"	202
Mr. Alfred Angula, General Secretary of the Namibia Farm Workers' Union	

Interview 7: “We all speak the same language and that is farming”	206
Mr. Solomon Tjipura, Chairman: Namibia Emerging Commercial Farmers’ Forum	
Interview 8: “Land hunger will never stop”	209
Mr. Sakkie Coetzee, Executive Manager: Namibia Agricultural Union (2002-2017)	
Interview 9: “There is a perception that land expropriation is mainly targeting foreigners”	211
Ms. Ute König, Deputy Head of Mission, German Embassy in Namibia (2004-2008)	
Interview 10: “Our new government is just doing damage control of what was done during colonialism”	214
Zephania Kameeta, Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Namibia (2002-2013) and Namibian Minister of Poverty Eradication and Social Welfare (2015 -2020)	
Interview 11: “If land reform is abused for political gain, a catastrophe like in Zimbabwe is inevitable”	218
Reverend Schalk Pienaar, Moderator of the Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church	
Interview 12: “Farming is good, but we need a lot of money in order to be productive”	222
Mr. Andreas Amushila, Affirmative action farmer	
Interview 13: “I paid the government for this farm, and this feels good”	227
Ms. Thekla Kahiru, Affirmative action farmer	
Interview 14: “We do not regret a thing”	230
Ms. Rachel Cinana, Resettlement farmer	
Interview 15: “Here I am happy and free”	232
Mrs. Maria Witbooi, Resettlement farmer	
Interview 16: “Our aim is farming – it is just that we need more land”	234
Mr. Ronald Kazarua, resettlement farm	
Interview 17: “We would like a farm of our own; this place belongs to the government”	237
Mr. and Mrs. Vries, Resettlement farmers	
Interview 18: “I have good work, but I do not have a home”	240
Mr. David Kheiseb, Farm worker	

Interview 19: “Farm workers could perhaps get a little piece of land ...”	243
Ms. Selma Tiboth, Farm worker,	
Interview 20: “With independence we got self-governance but not the land”	246
Mr. Usiel Kandjii, Communal leader and community farmers	
Interview 21: “Every peaceful day is a good day”	249
Mr. Gerd Wölbling, Commercial farmer	
Interview 22: “For the Herero, no value is attached to land, value is attached to cattle”	253
Mr. Assaph Kandje, community leader	
Interview 23: “I trust that the Namibian government will keep to law and order” ..	256
Mr. Harry Schneider-Waterberg, Commercial farmer	
Extended Interview 24: “Land and cattle are inseparable to the Herero people” ..	259
Mr. Ueriuka Festus Tjikuua, Community leader and farmer	
Extended Interview 25: “We are thinking about a new kind of farm community” ..	263
Mr Ulf-Dieter and Ms Christine Voigts, Commercial farmers	
Interview 26: “I am dreaming and hoping again for better times to come”	268
Mr Guido von Wietersheim, Commercial farmer	
Interview 27: “Land Reform: An opportunity for a ‘winners’ all’ situation”	274
Mr. Reimer Thiessen, Commercial farmer	
Interview 28: “For me, to be able to live on a farm is more important than owning a farm”	279
Mr Markus Berner, Commercial farmer	
Map of Namibia	283

Preface to the first edition 2008

18 years after independence, the land question still stands firmly on the political agenda in Namibia. Righting the wrongs of the past and changing the racially skewed land ownership, while at the same time maintaining social peace, agricultural productivity and a prosperous economy, has remained a challenge.

So far, the Namibian Government's approach to land reform has by and large been cautious, politically prudent, and informed by sensitivities on both sides of the racial divide. About 17% of the formerly exclusively white-owned commercial farm land is now in the hands of black Namibians. However, while for some the process of land reform has been disappointingly slow, others perceive it as too fast, given the real or perceived capacity constraints on the part of the Namibian State, or of the new 'emerging' farmers. Also, while some regard the process as too politicized and lacking transparency, others see it as much too market-driven. Whether Namibia's land reform policies can realistically achieve their stated objectives in terms of poverty reduction, employment creation and income distribution is also a matter of debate. There is, however, unanimity that the land question remains a highly 'sensitive', 'emotional' and potentially 'explosive' issue.

Much has been written about land reform in Namibia over the past 18 years: polemical essays, scholarly articles, socio-economic and agronomic studies, consultancy reports and summaries of conference proceedings - supplemented by newspaper reports on current land-related issues. These publications have provided a vast array of perspectives on land and land reform in Namibia. However, in our view, one fundamental aspect has never received the attention it deserves, namely the 'human' or 'emotional' side of land reform. Although often mentioned as key factor for understanding the explosive nature of the land issue, and although sometimes seen as even decisively driving the land reform process, literature has so far not systematically dealt with the emotions and perceptions of both the landless and the owners of land.

The present publication by Erika von Wietersheim is closing this essential gap in the current research. Based on formal interviews with policy makers and numerous informal talks with people who have been directly affected by the land issue, Erika von Wietersheim provides the reader with exciting new insights and a number of surprising connections and correlations. Through her sensitive style of writing she succeeds in bringing the reader close to her interview partners so that their feelings,

when talking about land, can be understood and they can be seen as the human beings they are.

The mission of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung is to contribute to the promotion of democracy, social justice, peace and international understanding through capacity-building, policy development and public dialogue. Although we may not necessarily agree with all aspects of this publication, we proudly associate ourselves with it. In the words of her protagonists, Erika von Wietersheim's book 'tells it like it is'. As such, we see it as an excellent contribution to public debate; it could trigger an honest dialogue about land across the racial divide - in a spirit of mutual understanding, respect and support, as the basis for a shared destiny.

"This land is my land" is also recommended to readers who have no or little previous knowledge about land and land reform in Namibia. Exciting, never boring and presented in an easy flowing, intelligible language, this is their book to start with. "This land is my land" does not only deal with the previously neglected human sides of the land puzzle; the formal aspects of the land reform process are equally well researched and dealt with. We are convinced that this publication has what it takes to appeal to a wide audience both within and outside Namibia.



Hubert René Schillinger
Resident Representative
Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung
Namibia Office
2008

Preface to the second extended edition 2021

At the core of most heated political debates in Namibia you will find questions of land and housing – today more than ever before, and probably even more so in future. This becomes evident whenever political parties or movements successfully mobilize new followers by rallying around the issue of land; and it becomes evident every time you listen to Namibians. “Having land means having a home”, as many of them put it when speaking to the author, Erika von Wietersheim. Unquestionably so, in Namibia, access to land is still a matter of earning a livelihood; of the culturally determined significance of cattle farming; of the historically inscribed bonding to ancestral lands. All of this is still true. However, the impact of land matters goes way beyond all these connotations. “Land gives people safety and security, and peace of mind”, as one of the interviewees put it already in 2008, when the first edition of Erika von Wietersheim’s book was published by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Namibia.

Looking at the developments around the land question since 2008, it is not difficult to understand why “having a home” today means even more than it used to do during the past 31 years of independence. Against the background of the impact of the severe drought, the economic decline and utter desperation in many rural areas, Namibians have been flocking to the urban areas in their hundreds of thousands. In Windhoek alone, several hundred of internal migrants arrive every month. And they arrive with a clear expectation: More than anything else, they aspire to secure a piece of land to make a new home. Thus, since 2008, the focus of the land debate has significantly shifted from the rural to the urban sphere.

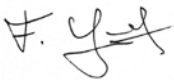
And although a lot has happened since 2008, the hopes and aspirations invested in the different approaches towards conflict resolution in land matters have significantly given way to disappointment and pessimism. Even the land resettlement programs have effectually done little to address the colonial legacy of land dispossession, seeing that many of the communities who were to benefit from them remain as socially marginalized and economically excluded as before. There is, on the contrary, a growing perception that the current land reform programs have most of all been favoring the politically well connected.

After the Second Land Conference had ended on high notes of excitement and expectations in 2018, virtually none of its recommendations have been implemented

until recently, when the Commission of Inquiry into Claims of Ancestral Land Rights and Restitution published its report in March 2021, highlighting the need to enact legislation and to set up additional bodies to assist claimants and adjudicate claims.

Against this background, it is safe to say that Erika von Wietersheim's book is of even higher importance today than it already was in 2008. Because of the author's unique approach to the land question, the book provides illuminating and refreshing insights for anyone who seeks to understand the importance of land matters in Namibia. Keeping clear from jumping to conclusions and instead sitting down with and attentively listening to those who actually are the experts on the ground – the farmers themselves, irrespective of their socio-economic background – Erika von Wietersheim has managed to collect a wealth of perspectives and insights.

For the new and extended edition of her book, Erika von Wietersheim went back to re-interview five of her previous interviewees on their respective views of the developments since 2008 and their individual future perspectives. Furthermore, a chapter on land reform developments between 2007 and 2020 is added, written by Professor Wolfgang Werner. Additionally, Erika von Wietersheim provides a summary of the Report of the Commission of Inquiry into Claims of Ancestral Land Rights and Restitution. All in all, the book provides highly informed as well as fascinating reading for anyone trying to get a grasp on the importance of the land question in Namibia today.



Freya Gruenhagen
Resident Representative
Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung
Namibia Office
2021

Author's Note

This publication does not claim to be based on empirical methods and criteria of research. I conducted this study as a journalist, and I observed and interpreted realities with the eyes of a journalist.

My selection of interview partners, stories and opinions have been partly subjective and partly the result of good luck. And yet I have strived for a meaningful investigation by selecting a broad spectrum of affected people and interest groups, and incorporating the relevant literature.

My sincere hope is that by exposing some of the emotions, expectations, hopes and fears around land, this study can add to the knowledge about our country, its people and the factors playing a role in the land reform process. My hope is also that this knowledge will lead to more understanding and the wish to find common and viable solutions.

A selection of shortened interviews which I conducted with more than 50 people in 2007 and 2008 forms the second part of this book. For this edition, I interviewed, 13 years later, five interview partners again to find out how their views and experiences had changed over the past 13 years.

An additional chapter by Wolfgang Werner brings the information, figures and developments with respect to land reform up-to-date.

I also added a chapter, "The need to find a forward looking approach". It summarizes the Report of the Commission of Inquiry into Claims of Ancestral Land Rights and Restitution, which was compiled after the Second National Land Conference in 2018. This report might provide an important basis for future decisions on land reform.

PART 1

This land is my land!

“For sure there are strong feelings”

This study: why and how

“I am the owner of this farm”

I arrived unannounced on Kleinfontein, a farm in the arid south of Namibia. I stopped in front of an old, well kept farm house – obviously German style, built from solid and square natural stones and surrounded by huge trees. However, no German farmer stepped out of the house to welcome me. Instead, a delicate, elderly Nama woman approached me, shyly shook my hands and invited me to sit down on her shady veranda. Several grand children curiously followed us and squatted against the bright yellow wall.

“Yes, I am the owner of the farm,” said Mrs Rachel Cinana proudly, after I had told her that I am interviewing farmers in remote areas; farmers who cannot usually be reached by telephone. And yes, Kleinfontein formerly belonged to a Namibian-German family. After independence it was bought by the Namibian government in the course of land reform and divided into four portions for resettlement. After applying for a piece of land in 1999, Cinana was lucky to receive the part that included the beautiful homestead.

Rachel Cinana manages the farm together with her husband; on my arrival he was still out in the veldt, herding their small herd of 130 goats. Life is not easy: they have lost animals due to the drought, their water installations are damaged, and they experience a total lack of government services. “The government said they would support us with maintenance and repairs,” she said, “but nobody is coming.”

However, during the past seven years Cinana was able to slowly increase the number of her goats and to plant water melons, sweet potatoes and beetroot for her family and for sale in Maltahöhe, the nearest village. But what is even



Katharina Thölken

Farmer Rachel Cinana

more important to her is that on this piece of land, small and dry as it is, she is able to take long-term control of her life and to develop a sense of belonging.

Before resettlement she had worked on a commercial farm as a farm labourer. "I was glad I had that job," she said, "but I was not able to plan my life. I was dependent and I was never sure what would happen to me and my children once I would be too old to work."

The deep-seated wish to have a safe place to stay for the rest of her life, a place where she would carry the responsibilities as well as the risks, was greater than a secure job for a few more years.

"We are still poor," Rachel Cinana continued, "but we have a beautiful house and we take good care of the land that was entrusted to us. We can send our grandchildren to school and we can feed ourselves. And I am looking forward to December, when the whole family will come from near and far to celebrate Christmas together with us at this place which is our own."

Rachel Cinana is one of the more than 1,500 beneficiaries who have been resettled with their families since independence (until 2007) on farms bought by the Namibian government from white commercial farmers.

In Namibia, land reform was introduced by the new black majority government after the country's independence in 1990. The overall aim was to redistribute land from white into black hands after 100 years of colonialism and apartheid, and the overall hope was that this would somehow contribute to social peace, political stability and economic development.

Measured against the target of redistribution, the land reform process is still in its beginnings, even after 18 years of independence. Yet, already numerous investigations of its modest successes and apparent failures have been presented in economic, political and social research papers, policy analyses and conferences. Land reform experts heatedly discuss whether land reform is a necessary political tool or an unnecessary economic disaster, whether it is about reducing poverty or reducing injustice and whether so far land reform has been too slow or too fast.

In the midst of a jungle of opinions everybody agrees with one assertion: land reform is a highly emotional issue. This is not only true for Namibia, but is an undisputed general agreement in all African countries where the indigenous populations were deprived of their lands by colonial or apartheid regimes.

“Land is arguably the most sensitive, complex and important issue for post-colonial African governments,” wrote Financial Times journalist Alec Russell in November 2006, when in South Africa and Zimbabwe land reform was again causing heated debate and controversy.

Even outside Africa, the issue of land reform provokes extreme emotions. You come from Namibia? What about land reform over there? Again and again I was asked this question when I visited Europe. One reason surely was the situation in our neighbouring country, Zimbabwe, where during the past years President Robert Mugabe and his government have expropriated more than 4,000 white farms. The European press has pounced on stories about white Zimbabweans who were chased from their land with brutal force, and how agricultural production in Zimbabwe, once one of Africa’s bread baskets, has broken down almost completely and has left at least 80% of the population living below the poverty threshold.

Will Namibia go the same way, European tourists, investors and journalists ask almost breathlessly. And what would then happen to the numerous white Namibian farmers? And in which way would those German or other foreign land owners, who have realized their luxurious dream of ‘a farm in Africa’, be affected?

Land inside out

For most indigenous Namibians, having land is no luxury. The majority of the country’s population depends in one form or another on agriculture for its livelihood, and the present land distribution is associated with injustice, poverty and racial discrimination. Land reform has therefore been described by social scientists and journalists as ‘a burning issue’, ‘potentially explosive’, highly sensitive’ or ‘most controversial’, and Pan Africanist Uazuva Kaumbi even went as far as asserting that “the smouldering land question will explode into an inferno.”¹

Also, when I spoke to people ‘on the street’ and formally interviewed more than 50 persons, including politicians, church leaders and farmers, nobody hesitated to describe land reform as being highly emotional.

“You can call it political or emotional, but for sure, there are strong feelings about land reform,” said Prime Minister Nahas Angula. Minister Willem Konjore² agreed

¹ In: Hunter, Justine (ed.) 2004. *Who should own the land? Analysis and views on land reform and the land question in Namibia and South Africa*. Windhoek: Konrad Adenauer Foundation

² Mr. Willem Konjore was Minister of Environment and Tourism until April 2008, and was then Minister of Youth, National Service, Sport and Culture.

that people “get very emotional about land reform in different ways”. Alfred Angula, General Secretary of the Namibian Farm Workers Union was even sensitive about the mere question why land reform was sensitive, wondering why I, as a white person, was asking this question. And former Namibian National Farmers Union (NNFU) executive director Vehaka Tjimune admitted that during the past years of the land reform process, even “the whole NNFU has been very emotional”.

Church leaders concurred that churches are called to help people deal with emotions around land reform, while all farmers and even most farm workers admitted that they had a strong emotional connection with their land.

Although racial injustice was experienced in all areas of life before independence, no issue in Namibia has cooked up emotions as intensively as the land issue. Since 1990 the new Namibian government has initiated all kinds of measures to create racial equality after decades of apartheid. It has restructured the civil service to open up more jobs for black people; it has prescribed affirmative action programmes to private companies to allow more black people into management positions; and it has supported black empowerment groups to get a larger share in the still very white dominated business of the country. And yet, no measure in the white dominated business sector has ever evoked the same intensity of emotions as the redistribution of “white” land, even though the financial power of white business people is considerably stronger than that of white farmers.

While the existence of all these emotions are acknowledged by everyone without any doubts or qualifications, they are nevertheless rarely clearly identified, investigated or analysed, let alone considered as important factors in debates or decisions. Sometimes they are vaguely described as either fear of losing land on the side of the white minority, or high expectations about gaining land on the side of the black majority, but they have never been addressed in practice, neither by the churches, nor by agricultural unions, or by governments or non-governmental organizations.

In spite of the multitude of studies on land reform the almost impenetrable thicket of emotions around land is an unpopular topic for scientific investigation. It is cumbersome and time consuming to involve people in a discussion about something as elusive as their feelings; it is even more difficult to understand, describe and evaluate them and therefore almost impossible to investigate them empirically and quantitatively. However, if there is unanimous agreement on the intense emotionality around land reform, should an investigation of this aspect not form part of the whole picture?

As a journalist, but also as a German speaking Namibian and a farmer myself for many years, I therefore felt not only curiosity, but also the need and obligation to explore land reform at a point where the thicket was thickest. I wanted to know more about the following:

1. Why, precisely, is land reform such an emotional issue? Where do the emotions originate and by which factors are they fuelled? And what significance do these emotions have for land reform?
2. Why do people really want land? Do they want land mainly for farming – or are there other more hidden hopes, needs and emotions associated with the return of a piece of land?
3. In which way are people in Namibia emotionally connected with land? Are there differences between black and white? Is it indeed so, as often stated, that black Africans have a more spiritual and communal relation to land, while white Africans or Europeans regard land as a means of production, an economic asset, and as private property? Or is it possible that since independence black and white farmers have much more in common than we think? And in which way might the development from communal to private ownership of land change people's connection with the land?

Stories instead of interviews

To obtain answers to my questions I initially used the tried and tested method of questionnaires and posted or delivered them to a number of farmers. But it soon became clear that the questionnaires designed by me (in English, Afrikaans and German) were too long and complex for both farmers and farm workers to fill in – not because of inability, but because of sheer fatigue and lack of enthusiasm. During the past years farmers in Namibia had to fill in an avalanche of questionnaires (from government, the unions, from agricultural organizations, from non-governmental organizations and from researchers) and they were and are – last but not least because of the sensitivity of the threat of expropriation – distrustful, careful and just simply tired of answering questions about themselves and their land.

I also noticed that those farmers who did fill in questionnaires – or at least part of them – often revised their answers substantially during follow-up interviews, especially when emotions around land played a role. While their written answers on the questionnaire were more or less politically correct, they were much more sincere once we began talking.

I thus soon realized that questionnaires were the wrong approach. To gain insight into people's emotions you need to listen patiently and accurately, and last but not least you need to respond sensitively to different people of different backgrounds and cultures. This is only possible in face to face encounters.

Therefore I decided to visit farmers, where they live and work, so that I could listen to their stories and learn about their fears and hopes through what they said and through what they remained silent about, through what I could see of their life and their land and through what I could read in their faces.

These interviews and talks were naturally much more time consuming with respect to preparation, travelling, transcription and editing, but they provided a much richer harvest for my study. The face to face encounters with my interview partners enabled me to build the trust that was so necessary for getting multilayered and honest answers. I could also use my position as a Namibian and as a former farmer myself, to meet farmers at a different level from a researcher, and I could explain in detail the aims and objectives of the study.

In addition, I could agree on how, and to what extent, answers would be used and publicized. For example, every interview partner was assured that nothing would be published under his or her name that had not been previously seen in written form for approval. Most people did not see the need for this, but for some this agreement was extremely important. Some farmers also asked to remain anonymous, and I promised to respect that.

At the end of our meetings many farmers said that the talks had prompted them to think about land reform from different perspectives. They were thankful for 'food for thought' and new perceptions, and they admitted that the talks had helped them to become more open to seeing the other side of the racial land divide.

Another advantage of the direct interview approach was that it enabled me to pass on the knowledge and experiences, which I collected during my visits, from one interview partner to the next. Black farmers learned about the emotions and insecurities of white farmers, and white farmers about the hopes, expectations and disappointments of their black compatriots. Farm owners heard what farm workers told me, politicians listened to what I learned from farm workers and farmers, and vice versa. In this way the interviews turned out to be not only a means to an end, but an end in itself.

5,000 kilometres and 50 interviews

With notebooks and tape recorder in my bag, and with water bottles, sunscreen and spare tires in my car, I started a journey of more than 5,000 kilometres through Namibia with my questions in mind and eyes open for everything that lay on my way. I travelled to the south, around Maltahöhe, and to the north, near Grootfontein, to Hochfeld and Okakarara in the east, and to Dordabis and the Khomas Hochland in the centre of the country.³

During my trip, I spoke with white farm owners who live in fear and insecurity in the face of threatening land expropriation, and to their black farm workers, and I spoke to those who remain confident about their future. I spoke with poor small-scale black farmers in the south and the north, who were resettled by the government on portions of formerly white-owned farms. And I spoke to more well-off black farmers, who, with the assistance of government loans for 'formerly disadvantaged' Namibians, were for the first time allowed to become private owners of large farms.

I spoke to young university students and to pensioners, to the landless and the land hungry, to those who lost land recently, or in the past, and to old and new landowners. I took a look at land reform from the inside – and at its human face.



*Farmer Thekla Kahiru in conversation
with the author*

Sometimes I drove for more than a hundred kilometres, only to find a farm completely deserted by humans, sometimes I got lost for hours. Most of the time I was unable to request an interview with small-scale farmers by telephone and just arrived unannounced, dusty and thirsty. I was always welcome and treated as a guest, although it took time to explain who I was and what I wanted. It also took time to create trust.

I spent many hours with white, mostly German speaking farmers, discussing the future of Namibia and the future of farming and land ownership. It was much easier to announce myself with them, because they had telephones and cell phones. But

³ See map on page 259

sometimes when I found a farm along the way I spontaneously decided to try my luck – and again was welcomed like a long expected guest.

Visiting new black farm owners proved to be the most difficult task, because the majority of farmers whom I approached do not reside on the farm, are working in town, or were busy travelling somewhere in or out of the country. Sometimes, when I managed to arrange a time and place to meet, they were not there, because they did not receive my message or had to leave the farm for one emergency or another. But I am deeply indebted to those farmers who took time to show me their farm, answer my many strange questions, and were prepared to discuss topics which, some admitted, they had never thought about in that way before.

I also interviewed a number of farm workers. In some cases I had difficulties making myself clear about what exactly I wanted to know, to gain trust, and to get clarifying information. In other cases I was absolutely amazed at the level of knowledge and insight of some farm workers about land reform, and their clear view of their own role in the process – even though some admitted that they were illiterate or never went to school.

Sometimes I asked local acquaintances to accompany me on my visits and to translate my Afrikaans or English into Nama or Otjiherero. Often these local guides not only helped me to open the intricate locks of the farm gates, but also the hearts and minds of the farmers. And we always talked about much more than land reform. We talked about the past drought, animal diseases, the difficulty of raising children, lazy or exemplary neighbours, and politics.

By the end of my journey I had learned that Namibians, no matter which ‘culture’ they come from, have difficulties giving directions. They need landmarks like big trees, service stations or funnily shaped anthills to tell you where to turn off, but they never use words like left and right, north or south. If there were no outstanding landmarks around, they used their whole body to describe where I had to go, their arms moving left and right, their heads nodding and shaking, their descriptions more of a dance than a verbal explanation.

The most difficult part was interpreting what people meant by ‘not far’ or ‘very near’. It could mean anything between 500 metres or 50 kilometres, it was impossible to get a clear idea of distance. Rural people seem to feel rather than measure directions – and these feelings are very different for those who are complete strangers in an area, where farms are more than 20 kilometres apart and not always visible from the main road, or indicated by sign boards.

Before starting with my journey across the country, I held a number of interviews in Windhoek with government ministers, church leaders, and representatives of

agricultural organizations, in order to draw from their experiences and reflections. I assumed that they would offer more or less official views and assessments, but was surprised by their openness and self-criticism. Often the interviews lasted longer than two hours, even with government ministers.

I was bold enough to request interviews with State President Hifikepunye Pohamba, as well as the Founding President Sam Nujoma. I did not succeed, but received very kind and appreciative answers and a written referral to the Minister of Lands and Resettlement. This however proved an odyssey beyond description – and without a final arrival. Several meetings were promised and arranged, but the Minister⁴ never turned up or was ‘too busy’, and later openly refused an interview without giving any reasons. Also some letters to other officials in the Ministry were never answered, neither by phone nor by fax. The reasons for this are unknown to me.

In between I talked to people in the street, in shops, at work and in my circle of family and friends to informally discover the views, attitudes and experiences of Namibians that are usually not reflected in statistics.

The aim was to get answers to my three questions, at the risk of finding more questions around each corner, and in the end to present what I observed, read and heard. By making people’s emotions more visible, and hopefully more comprehensible, I wanted to provide additional and more personalized information to the numerous analyses of land reform.

The intense emotions around the loss of land of course offered ample material for interesting tales. It was, however, not my intention to merely add a few human interest stories to the existing body of statistical investigations of land reform. My approach was based on the fact that contemporary social science is increasingly recognizing that the study of emotions is a very rational way of understanding social questions.

Pushing emotions into the ‘less serious’ areas of literature, newspaper stories and psychology is increasingly seen as counterproductive and wrong. ‘Thinking needs feeling’ was, for example, one of the slogans of a study by the Max-Planck Institute for Human Development in Berlin, based on the finding that, to understand human thinking, and especially human decision-making, we need to understand and consider human emotions.

⁴ At that time, the Minister of Lands and Resettlement was Minister Jerry Ekandjo. He was replaced by Minister Alpheus Ngarue in April 2008.

Nomenclature and bias

Whether we want to call it by its name or not, land reform is a black and white issue: a certain amount of white owned land is supposed to change into black hands. The beneficiaries of land reform are black, while the people who are targeted as 'willing sellers' of this land, or for its expropriation, are white.

I am aware that at this point in time it is neither politically correct nor humanly desirable to emphasize the colour of people's skin. However, officially used terms such as 'formerly disadvantaged' or 'historically advantaged' in the context of land reform are neither more precise nor more correct, but merely create mental detours in people's minds, always ending up in the simple translation into 'black' and 'white'.

Of course it does influence people's thinking whether you call somebody 'black' or 'formerly disadvantaged'; it shifts the emphasis from the racial to the social sphere. But 18 years into independence I dare to use the terms that people use on the streets and during ordinary conversation, and I ask for forgiveness if it hurts or disturbs any reader. My main reason for simply using the terms 'black' and 'white' is that they make sentences shorter and meanings clearer. They call a spade a spade. I sincerely hope that this kind of clarification will one day become redundant.

I am also aware that as a white, German speaking Namibian I was possibly not always unbiased when it came to finding interview partners, selecting topics for discussion, and interpreting cultural and political attitudes.



Although I attempted to see and bring forward all sides, I had no choice but to do this as a person who is shaped by the history and present day realities of this country, just as much as those Namibians whom I interviewed. To look at the sensitive topic of land reform as a completely objective outsider is not possible.

On the way to resettlement farm Kleinfontein

Land reform so far

Leaving the past behind

‘Only people without a future are preoccupied with the past.’ This was the attitude of many Namibians, when their country became independent in 1990. Politicians wanted to use the momentum of a new beginning to shape the future without burdening themselves with the ballast of the past 30 years of German colonialism, 75 years of South African apartheid, and the violation of human rights in their own ranks during the liberation struggle.

When the black led liberation movement, the South West African People’s Organisation (SWAPO), won the first democratic election with a clear majority, it generously proclaimed its victory as a victory of all Namibians over injustice and oppression, and the jubilation of the black masses was re-composed into a song of national reconciliation and nation building.

Peace and stability for a common future were the slogans which convinced white farmers to stay in the country and black Namibians to reach out their hands in reconciliation.

This attitude towards the past and the publicly proclaimed policy of national reconciliation also decisively shaped Namibia’s land reform policy.

The heritage of the past

When Namibia became independent, colonialism and apartheid bequeathed to the new country two very different kinds of land:

‘Communal land’

About half of Namibia’s agricultural land (48%) has always remained occupied by blacks. During colonialism and apartheid it was structured into so called ‘reserves’ or ‘homelands’, administered by traditional chiefs and mainly used for small-scale farming. Today these areas are called ‘communal land’, and although they are still administered by traditional chiefs, the state holds title to these lands.

More than half of Namibia's two-million population still lives in these communal areas which are scattered all over the country, and have poor agricultural potential. They include the former so called 'Namaland' in the arid south, 'Hereroland' in the east and 'Damaraland' in the west.

The largest areas of communal land lie in the northern areas, such as the former Ovambo, Kaoko, Caprivi and Kavango homelands. These are areas with higher soil fertility and more reliable annual rainfall – however, large tracts of these lands have remained undeveloped.

'Commercial land'

The other half of agricultural land (52%) is so called 'commercial land', most of which was dispossessed from indigenous Namibian people by the German colonial government and under South African apartheid rule.

This area consists of about 6,000 large farms, owned privately by individuals or companies, based on a Western concept of ownership. Until independence these farms were almost exclusively in the possession of about 3,800 white farmers. Most farms were well developed, last but not least because they were highly subsidized by the apartheid government.⁵

With independence, the question arose how this unequal and racially based distribution of land could be addressed, changed or reversed?

Too much or too little history?

When apartheid came to an end in South Africa in 1994, the new government under its first black president, Nelson Mandela, decided after more than 350 years of foreign occupation to actively come to terms with the past. The new South African government created, for example, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. It was painful, time consuming and costly, but it was a process which took people's emotions into account.

South Africa also created a process whereby black South Africans could reclaim land that their families had lost to white farmers through the 'Land Tenures Act of 1913'. This was possible because forced removals from land at that time were

⁵ Harring, S.L. & W. Odendaal (2007). *No Resettlement Available*, Windhoek: Legal Assistance Centre. p.3

meticulously documented by the administratively efficient colonial government. Consequently, former ownership of land could be traced and reversed, or compensated accordingly, and in 1995 black South Africans, who were dispossessed around 1913, were encouraged to put forward their claims to a newly established Land Claims Commission.

Up to the year 2006 almost 80,000 such claims were made, and more than 60,000 claims were solved in the following way: Land that was claimed by a black South African was either bought by the state from its white owner and returned to the original owner, or, if white owners refused to sell their land to the government, claimants would be offered either an alternative piece of land or financial compensation. 70% of these land claims were solved through financial compensation.⁶

While South Africa's land policy was at least partly based on history, the land question in Namibia was tackled without reverting to the past at all.

In 1991 the Namibian government hosted a 'National Conference on the Land Question and Land Reform' with 500 participants from all over the country. The aim was to reach consensus on the matter of land reform and property rights. After lengthy discussions it was decided that no land claims by black Namibians who had lost land during colonialism and apartheid would be recognized – and that land distribution before colonialism would not play a role.

A clear cut with the past after a century of war and violence seemed opportune and realistic, because the Namibian government stressed that there was no fixed point in history (such as the Land Tenure Act of 1913 in South Africa) which could or would be used to restore ancestral land rights. Instead, the government would institute different, and entirely pragmatic strategies and procedures to return land to the formerly dispossessed.

These conference resolutions set the course for all future land reform policies and decisions as well as for the expectations, conflicts and disappointments that would accompany them.

The two instruments of land reform

The division of Namibia's agricultural land into black communal and white commercial land, one of the numerous heritages of apartheid, prompted the new black majority

⁶ African Studies Quarterly, Volume 9, Issue 4, 2007

government to embark on two parallel land reforms programmes, based on the protection of private property:

- Communal land reform, which mainly involves improved control and regulation of the communal areas or 'tribal' land under traditional authority, and
- Commercial land reform, which involves the redistribution of privately owned 'white' land into black hands.

Communal land belongs to the state, but is for all practical purposes administered by traditional chiefs. They are allowed to allocate or revoke the allocation of land to individuals or families according to the customary laws of their community. The Communal Land Reform Act of 2002 basically confirms the powers of traditional chiefs, but challenges their absolute authority through the establishment of Communal Land Boards that serve as democratic control organs.

Although communal land reform affects more than half of Namibia's population, it is rarely a topic in the media, of election campaigns, or of heated public or private discussions. There are conflicts over land rights, about fencing off communal land for private use, and over the scope and limits of traditional chiefs, but the extreme emotions and sensitivities over land usually revolve around the redistribution of white owned land in the commercial farm areas.

Commercial land, however, is owned under title deeds by individuals (or companies) and as such is protected as private property by the Namibian Constitution. In order to redistribute privately white owned land into black hands, the government therefore has three options:

1. It can buy land from white farm owners on the 'willing buyer-willing seller principle' and allocate it to black farmers.
2. According to the constitution, it can also expropriate farms 'in the public interest', with 'just compensation' to farm owners, allowing appeals to court.
3. It can assist black farmers to purchase land directly from white farmers.

Two programmes for commercial land reform

This situation has led to the development of two programmes for commercial land reform: the Resettlement Scheme and the Affirmative Action Loan Scheme. These programmes are guided by the Agricultural (Commercial) Land Reform Act of 1995

and are implemented by the Ministry of Lands and Resettlement, a new ministry that was only created after independence.

The Affirmative Action Loan Scheme enables well-off black farmers to buy land from white farmers on the open market with the backing of government-guaranteed loans at a subsidised interest rate.

The conditions are that loan applicants have at least 150 head of cattle or a corresponding number of small stock such as goats and sheep, and an operating capital of about N\$ 150 000. If these requirements are met, the state bank, Agribank, loans the farmer 85% of the farm's purchase price, with government guaranteeing 35% of the loan.⁷

The Resettlement Scheme provides in principle for poor small-scale farmers. These farmers might either have farmed in overcrowded communal areas or would be poor landless people who are looking for land to make a living.

These farmers do not purchase land themselves, but are allocated land that was bought by the government. Former commercial farms, bought by the government, are usually divided into five or six portions, and resettlement farmers only receive one portion each, of between 1,000 and 3,000 hectares. People who would like to be resettled apply for a piece of land at a local branch of the Ministry of Lands and Resettlement.

During my trips, I visited one resettlement farm and one affirmative action farm that were described to me as 'model farms'. To provide a practical example of people living and working under the two different land reform schemes they are described in the next chapter. These are exceptional and not average farmers and are therefore not representative of the majority. But they might demonstrate what it takes to make land reform a successful venture and are, hopefully, a glimpse into the future.

“We had animals, money and experience” - A model resettlement farm

“Go and have a look at the farm of Mr. and Mrs. Vries”, the extension officer at the Ministry of Agriculture responsible for Khomas Region advised me, when I phoned him. He also named a few other resettlement farms in the same area, but the Vries farm, he said, was special.

⁷ Harring, S.L. & W. Odendaal (2007). *No Resettlement Available*, Windhoek: Legal Assistance Centre. P.20

My search for the five or six resettlement farms in the Dordabis area took me more than six hours. In this area commercial farms dominate, and most signboards show German farm names.

I decided to visit 'Korsika' resettlement farm first, which proved to be a never ending story. I stopped at four commercial farms along the road, asking "Where is Korsika, please?", and was directed by friendly farm employees sometimes in the right, often in the wrong direction - so it seemed to me. The problem, which I only realized later, was that 'Korsika' became several 'Korsikas' when divided up for resettlement and the dirt roads to the different parts took various directions.

I found one Korsika in the end, following a narrow, sandy path into the veldt and arriving at a deserted farm house, which I identified as the original homestead from all the descriptions I had heard before. The house was empty, surrounded by dead trees, some of which had started to collapse. Somebody had started to gather the dead wood into heaps; otherwise there was not a soul around; just four goats bleating in a kraal nearby.

I later learned from neighbours that a few years ago Korsika, apparently belonging to a white Afrikaans speaking commercial farmer, was bought by the government and divided into 4 portions for resettlement. One portion was the part that I had found, another one was given to a farmer 'who now lives in Angola', the third one to 'somebody, who now lives in the United Kingdom'. His family or children look after the farm, but nobody really feels responsible for its maintenance. The fourth portion was given to an old Herero farmer. He is living there permanently, 'he has made everything beautiful', built himself a house and a cool house, does pig breeding and runs a shop, where farm workers from the surrounding farms buy their goods.

From communal to commercial farming

After this first introduction to resettlement farming, and after having found at least one 'Korsika' where I only discovered desolation and destruction, I continued my search for the other farms mentioned by the agricultural officer. The only farm where the entrance gate was not locked was farm Nautabis-Sonderwater, owned by Mr. and Mrs. Vries near the village of Dordabis. There was a clearly visible sign board, trees, kraals, gardens and a huge corrugated iron house, painted a bright white. It was here that I found a resettlement success story.

When I arrived, the farmer couple was busy with farming activities. He was sorting out cattle in a kraal near the house, while she was working in the vegetable garden.

“Where I am, there must be a garden – that’s how I am!” Mrs. Vries, a sturdy, energetic woman in her fifties said, when greeting me. We spoke Afrikaans and the Vries couple, although I did not ask them, appeared to be of Rehoboth Baster⁸ origin. I soon realized that I was not the first stranger to visit them. Because the Vries farm is near to Windhoek and known as a resettlement success story, they are quite often ‘shown off’ to visitors, social scientists and even to curious tourists.



Arriving at farm Sonderwater

Mr. Vries fetched three plastic chairs from the house, invited me to sit down with them under a gnarled old camel thorn tree, and they started talking. I learned that the successful development of this farm began in 2003, when the Vries family applied for resettlement at the Ministry of Lands and Resettlement in Windhoek. It took about a year until their application was approved. What happened then was an outstanding example of long-term planning:

The Vries' had started farming in the communal area of the Rehoboth district. At that time it was Mrs. Vries who was the farmer. She had worked as a nurse in the Katutura State Hospital in Windhoek, but in 2001 she decided to leave her family in town and start farming in the 'Baster Reserve' near Dordabis – not for pleasure, but in order to learn and lay the foundation for a full-time farming business later on.

“I started with a garden, some cattle and some goats. I worked myself to death, but working yourself to death is all right. I learned a lot”, she recounted.

While Mrs. Vries was farming in the communal area, Mr. Vries worked for a transport company and was able to save money. In addition, he received a pay-out after 33 years with the same company. The Vries family therefore had a substantial amount of capital when they started farming on their own farm in 2003, and were able to

⁸ The Rehoboth Basters are the descendants of liaisons between the Cape Colony Dutch and indigenous African women. Around 1870, they moved from the Cape Colony to central Namibia in search of land, and settled in Rehoboth. The name Baster is derived from the Dutch word for 'bastard'. It is not considered pejorative by the Baster, but is proudly used as an indication of their history.

spend about 80,000 N\$ from their own pocket to get the farm in order - the kraals, the wind pumps and the water pipes – and to buy more animals.

Like many other communal farmers they had applied for resettlement, because life in the communal area had become impossible.

“We could not live there anymore. Our animals got stolen in the reserve all the time. We were not able to develop our farming. We saw other people, who had their own place, and they were living well. So we applied.”

The farm which they received is 1,578 hectares large, and according to Mr. Vries, they have a contract with the government with a lease agreement for 99 years. This was the only time I heard that resettlement farmers had such a contract with the government; the others only had ‘letters of appointment’ or no written proof of their right to farm on their piece of land at all.

Government and neighbourhood support

Also, in contrast to many other resettlement farmers, Mr. Vries did not complain about lack of government support.

“The dam was leaking and the government came to seal it. They also helped us with new pipes and a cylinder, a tank and an engine for water pumping. Just the generator we had to buy ourselves. They remained quiet about that.”

Mr. Vries was particularly grateful to the extension service of the Ministry of Agriculture and Water and knew all the extension officers by name:

“We are satisfied with the government, they did not lie back, they helped us. The extension service people from the Ministry of Agriculture come here a lot, we know them all.”

Although government support was and is vital, the Vries couple refused to become dependent on it: “Don’t sit with folded hands and wait for the government. Stand up and sweat!” is their motto – and they mean it. The farm is in good shape, the garden green, the house and the kraals are neat and well kept, the cattle and goats look healthy and fat.

Hard work and the willingness to learn were the foundation on which the Vries family built during the following years. But besides help from the government, help from neighbours was even more important for the development of their farming business and for their own skills as farmers. They did not hesitate to ask for help

and it was given generously, especially by white farmers who know the area and have gathered experience over generations:

“At the beginning we lost animals, because of different plants here which our animals could not eat. Our neighbours, also newly resettled black people, gave us information, but it did not help so much. Then we asked Mr. Kraft (a German commercial farmer in the neighbourhood) - he is the father here of everyone – and he came to us and wrote down a few things to try out, and in this way we progressed.”

The neighbours also sometimes help out when the Vries couple want to sell animals. They do not have a truck to transport their cattle to auctions and often sell their animals off the farm at lower prices. But when neighbours have space available on their trucks they load the Vries animals as well. The Vries couple is confident that this situation is only temporary and that with time they will improve their own means and infrastructure:

“We are still at a low level of farming. If we improve and come to a middle level, maybe we can hire a lorry and bring our animals to the auctions in Rehoboth.”

The Vries couple knows what it takes to be successful farmers, but from their own experience they also understand why many resettlement farmers struggle.

“Me and my wife we had animals, we had money and we had experience, when we started”, Mr. Vries explains. He knows that without these three pillars as a foundation, resettlement farmers often end up in a situation where they have to rent back their farms to richer neighbouring farmers to make ends meet:

“If you do not have enough money to repair your water pipes or dams, and if then somebody comes and offers to help you in return for grazing land, of course you take that help. The white farmer repaired their water and he gives them some money every month – so that is how it works. Now the resettlement farmers can even pay their farm workers something.”

Planning and control

The Vries couple took the opportunity that the Namibian government provided after independence – but they knew that only full control of their land and animals and sound planning would lead to success. This became evident when I asked Mrs. Vries how their life had improved since they were allocated this farm:



Cattle kraal on farm Sonderwater

“We see our animals growing, we have control over our animals. Here there is no stealing – only the jackals are stealing! Everything is camped (fenced) and safe. In the communal area there was just one huge camp, here we have seven camps.”

With more control over their animals, the farmers were able to develop a simple business plan:

“Now, when it rains, we sell milk and butter and from that money we buy salt and lick and medicine and fodder for our animals. Our pension

money we just spend on petrol, 370 N\$ is just enough for petrol.”

After becoming increasingly successful on a resettlement farm, the wish to have a larger farm – and one that they can call their own – is growing. The fact that Nautabis like all resettlement farms is small and belongs to the government is increasingly felt as a restriction on further development by the Vries couple. Their dream is to buy a farm of their own one day:

“They gave it to us for 99 years, but it is not our place, we just use it and must look after it. We did not buy it with our money, we just have a lease agreement for 1,578 hectares. Maybe if we work hard, we can buy a bigger farm.”

The Vries couple and their farming venture illustrate what it takes to be successful resettlement farmers: some initial capital and livestock, enthusiasm and hard work, basic farming and management experience and the willingness to learn more, and last but not least: the active support of government and neighbours.

Later, on my way home, I met a white neighbour of the Vries' in a shop in Dordabis; she was in fact the wife of the farmer who was described by the Vries as ‘the one who is the father of everyone’.

“Do you know the Vries farm?”

“Yes, of course, they are a good farmers and a good example. Many people are sent there to look at their farm.”

“Do you think they are treated as a government showcase?”

“No, they do not get any special treatment from the government, I am quite sure of that. They are just very good and hard working farmers who made the best of what the government offered them. We wish them well and assist them, when they ask us.”

“We all have one aim – and that is farming” - A model affirmative action farm

I heard about Mr. Andreas Amushila, a black Oshivambo speaking farmer, from a white commercial farmer in the Grootfontein district. “He is a good farmer”, I was told, “and he is an interesting person to talk to.”

I phoned Mr. Amushila and reached him on his farm Hafelberg. He invited me for the next day, the 11th October at 11 o'clock in the morning, and I was thankful that he had the time and the patience to talk with me and show me his farm.

I was lucky that I finally found an affirmative action farmer who was indeed residing on his farm, and who was around. Most others whom I tried to visit were absent from their farms, and I was told by farm workers either that they lived in town and only came ‘now and then’, that they had a business somewhere else and only came on weekends, or that they ‘come only sometimes and then maybe stay for the whole week’.

As an affirmative action farmer, Mr. Amushila did not receive a farm portion from the government like the Vries family. He had enough capital and cattle to qualify for the government’s affirmative action loan scheme to buy a full farm of more than 5,000 hectares in his own name, and to start large-scale commercial farming.

Amushila, clad in green overalls, boots and farmer’s hat looks like a seasoned farmer. In reality he had never been a full-time farmer before. He was a teacher, and later Deputy Director of Education in a northern region for the greater part of his life, and also spent some study years in Birmingham, England.

Before sitting down in his office to talk, he leads me around his homestead, shows me his luscious vegetable garden, new water installations and buildings, including

a bathroom and toilets for his workers, and elaborates on the numerous plans that he has for the future. He has already planted row after row of young trees, intends to de-bush large parts of his farm, sow bloubuffel grass in the veldt to improve the grazing, and build sand walls to prevent erosion.

A genuine interest in farming

Amushila is a so-called 'emerging' farmer, which means that he has not farmed in a commercial area before. But farming as such has always been part of his biography:

"As a boy I often worked as a farm labourer on farms near Windhoek. I also had agriculture as a subject at school. In 1992 I bought a plot of 480 hectare near Otavi. This was problematic because after some time my herd of cattle increased from 15 to 180, so I was hiring grazing in other areas. I was a part-time farmer and also produced maize and sorghum."

His decision to buy a commercial farm at the age of a pensioner was therefore based on a genuine interest in farming. For him it was important to take an informed decision which farm to buy in which area, and to plan how to use his state bank loan well:

"Some people just buy a farm for the sake of having a farm and do not make sure that the farm is of good quality, and this very soon puts them into a problem. – They also buy farms with loans, but the first thing they do is buy expensive diesel cars on hire purchase and then have difficulties paying back their loans. When the car is confiscated by the bank, he or she blames Agribank (the state bank)."

Amushila is extremely satisfied with his farm and happy to be a full-time farmer with about 400 head of cattle and high quality registered bulls, as well as goats and sheep. There are two aspects of farming he is particularly enthusiastic about: On the one hand he enjoys being 'productive', even though he knows that productivity requires effort and initiative. On the other hand Amushila enjoys being a competent manager and employer. He strictly applies modern management principles to his farming operations and has implemented democratic structures and transparent means of communication.

"As a farm owner you must be involved to get people working, but you must work together in a democratic way. At meetings we write minutes and type the results, then everybody gets a copy and signs it. The minutes are explained to the farm workers and translated if necessary. I make sure that they understand so that, when

I am not here, they know what to do and that it is something we have agreed upon. They know what they are paid for and what is expected from them.”

Amushila understands that his farm workers often know the farm area better than he does, and that they bring a wealth of knowledge about cattle and local plants to the operation:

“Give them a chance to air their views! And use the experience of your farm workers, who know the area and the cattle.”

He also finds it important to transfer his professional experience as a teacher to his farming business – and cannot hide his pedagogic inclinations: “As a full-time farmer you must be an employer plus a trainer.”

Amushila finds regular training of farm workers as important as jointly planning and discussing farm activities. Employees need to understand the different strategies that he, as a farmer, applies to make his farm more productive. Amushila, explains:

“For example, when you as a farmer decide to rotate your cattle from camp to camp, farm workers should not only be ordered to do it, but understand fully why this is important for improving the grazing.”

High standard of agriculture

According to Amushila, one of the most important factors in becoming a successful new farmer is good cooperation with neighbouring farmers, black and white alike. Amushila is lucky to live in a farming environment that not only welcomed him as one of them, but also actively supports him to improve his productivity – not for personal or political reasons, but because of the common goal of keeping the area’s standard of agriculture high:

“All farmers in this area are interested in producing good quality cattle. The established farmers therefore offer special prices for bulls to new farmers. They do this not only to earn money, but to ensure that in our area everybody produces cattle of good quality, so that, when we take our cattle to the market, there is no difference between black and white farmers.”

Neighbourly cooperation is particularly successful if old and new farmers meet each other at the same eye level with similar aims - and not as black and white Namibians, who somehow have to behave in a politically correct way. “We all have one aim and that is farming,” Amushila summarizes his experience, “and we need to work together as a team.”



*Farmer Andreas Amushila on farm
Hafelberg*

Independence and democracy provided the retired government official with new opportunities, and Amushila has made full use of the instruments that land reform offered to him. But he also has what it takes to be an economically successful commercial farmer:

He had accumulated the necessary capital to invest in farm development, maintenance of infrastructure and to pay his debts to the bank, and he owned a herd of cattle which he could use as a basis for further breeding.

Although he did not have a complete knowledge of commercial farming, he could build on his previous management and planning experiences, and was able to transfer them to his farming business. At the same time he was willing and motivated to continue learning, and was not reluctant to ask for and accept help from outside.

And the former educationalist also took care of the social aspects of farming. He knows that a farm owner and his employees depend upon each other, that farm workers need to be trained and motivated, and that they deserve to be treated well.

Land reform so far

Through the Affirmative Action Loan Scheme and the Resettlement Scheme the Namibian government has been trying to address the 'land hunger' of thousands of Namibians after independence. How far has land reform progressed so far?

In general, one can say that in Namibia today, on the basis of a sound legal framework, policies and guidelines with respect to land reform are in place. Donor support is forthcoming from many sides, and both the black and white dominated agricultural unions are in communication with the government and with each other.

During the first ten years of the Agricultural Land Reform Act of 1994, no use was made of the provision of expropriation. The first expropriation took place in 2004, and by the middle of 2008, no more than five farms had been expropriated in total.

In March 2008, a Namibian court halted the planned seizure of four farms owned by German citizens, saying that government had acted unconstitutionally. The German land owners had taken the Lands Ministry to court, arguing that expropriation orders served on them in 2005 discriminated against foreign investors and had not followed procedure.

In terms of figures, until July 2007, 349 full-time farmers and 274 part-time farmers had bought farms through the Affirmative Action Loan Scheme. In addition, about 180 blacks have purchased commercial farms on the open market without participating in a state loan scheme. 40 commercial farms were in black hands even before independence. This means that about 14%, or one out of seven commercial farms (843 out of 6,000), is today (2007) in the private ownership of black Namibians.⁹

The Affirmative Action Loan Scheme is demand driven and therefore difficult to measure against a target. However, it is significant that through this scheme nearly four times the amount of land has been distributed than under the resettlement scheme, through which, until April 2007, the state had only acquired 209 farms and resettled 2040 families.

Adding the figures of land distribution of both schemes, one can say that about 17% of formerly white land is now settled by blacks. After eighteen years of independence this does not seem to point to very much progress. But in comparison it is much more than what, for example, our neighbour South Africa has achieved.

In addition, redistribution has been achieved without violence, without illegal land grabs, and with the agricultural sector still prosperous. Although the government's reluctance to expropriate white-owned farms has led to impatience on the side of landless Namibians, social peace and stability has been maintained – which were both declared aims of the government after independence.

And yet, land reform remains a highly controversial issue. For some it is too slow, for others too fast, for some too politicized, for others too commercialized. People are, however, unanimous that it is 'emotional' and 'sensitive'.

⁹ Ministry of Lands and Resettlement (2207). Strategic Plan 2006-2010 (April). Windhoek: Ministry of Lands and Resettlement, Government of the Republic of Namibia

Further developments of land reform since 2007 until 2021

Wolfgang Werner

Until 2018, the focus of land reform in Namibia has almost exclusively been on the distribution of freehold agricultural land from primarily white owners to what is somewhat antiquatedly referred to as “previously disadvantaged” Namibians (the politically correct nomenclature for black Namibians). The reasons for this are easy to understand. The dispossession of primarily Ovaherero and Nama communities through a process of expropriation without compensation in 1906 and 1907 during the German colonial period has laid the foundation for the skewed land ownership structure that formed the foundation of Namibia’s high-income inequality.

At Independence in 1990, roughly 52 per cent of agriculturally usable land was held under freehold title mostly by white landowners, while 48 per cent fell within the communal areas, which accommodated well over half the Namibian population.¹⁰ If the availability of water is considered, the commercial farming sector comprised 57 per cent of the net area of land that could be utilised for agricultural production, compared to 43 per cent for communal land.

Most land in communal areas continues to be held under some form of customary tenure. The Communal Land Reform Act of 2002 has introduced the option to obtain long-term leaseholds over limited areas of communal land that was designated for commercial agricultural development, but freehold titles cannot be obtained.

Land reform and the commercial farming sector

Until today, Government has continued to use the two-pronged land reform program in the freehold or commercial farming sector that sought to bring about a more equal distribution of freehold agricultural land.

One component of this program remains the National Resettlement Program (NRP). This program has focused on making agricultural land, bought by the state, available to small-scale farmers. Large-scale commercial farms are sub-divided into portions ranging between a recommended minimum of 1,500 ha in the central and northern regions to 3,000 in the southern half of the country, according to the policy. This transformation of large-scale commercial farming is intended to settle as many people on the land as possible.

¹⁰ Of the total land area, 44 per cent is held under freehold title and 41 per cent are non-freehold or communal areas. The remaining 15 per cent are either diamond areas or national parks.

By contrast, the second component of the land reform program known as the Affirmative Action Loan Scheme (AALS) has enabled individuals to purchase whole farms with a subsidized loan from Agribank, a state-owned enterprise.

Many “previously disadvantaged” Namibians continue to feel that the pace of distribution of freehold agricultural land is too slow. 2020 is an appropriate year to reflect on whether these perceptions are justified or not. The year not only marks 30 years of land redistribution, but also the year in which the Government of Namibia had hoped to reach the official target of 5 million hectares of redistributed land through the National Resettlement Program.

So how have we fared?

Based on currently available data, approximately 30% of freehold agricultural land has by now been transferred to black Namibians.¹¹ This figure includes

- land belonging to black farmers (and land acquired by Representative Authorities under various drought relief schemes) before independence 1990 (181)
- farms acquired under the National Resettlement Programme (556)
- farms transferred by the Ministry of Agriculture, Water and Forestry to the Ministry of Land Reform (53)
- farms acquired under the Affirmative Action Loan Scheme (648)
- farms purchased by black Namibians with private loans from commercial banks (234)

The figures in the table below show that the 3,3 million hectares bought under the National Resettlement Scheme falls short of the official target of 5 million hectares.

If the 53 farms transferred by the Ministry of Agriculture, Water and Forestry (MAWF) at the time are added, a total of 609 farms measuring 3,71 million hectares has been made available to mostly small-scale farmers.

¹¹ These figures should be used with care as different official institutions have different sets of data. No land audit exists to provide accurate figures. The figures for privately bought farms has been compiled from Nghiteveleka et al., 2018, p. 10.

This combined figure is less than the 648 farms acquired under the Affirmative Action Loan Scheme since its inception in 1992, and it means that the target of 5 million hectares has only been reached by 74%.

Table 1 provides a summary.

Table 1: Distribution of freehold (commercial) agricultural land 2020

Year	Type of acquisition	No. of farms	Total freehold area (ha.)	Distribution % of freehold area
Before 1990	Land belonging to 'black farmers'	181	980,260	3
1991-2020	National Resettlement Programme	556	3,300,000	9
	Farms transferred by MAWF to MLR	53	411,257	1
1992-2018	Affirmative Action Loan Scheme	648	3,407,368	9
1992-2018	Land acquired by previously disadvantaged Namibians outside the AALS (private purchases)	234	2,853,722	8
	Sub-total 1991-2017	1,257	9,972,347	28
	Sub-total including 1980-1990	1,438	10,952,607	30
	Total freehold area		36,164,880	

Source: Pre-Independence figures: Office of the Prime Minister, 1991, *National Conference on Land Reform and the Land Question*, Vol. 1, p.126; NSA, 2018, pp.39; 47; Ministry of Agriculture, Water and Land Reform, 2020. *Technical Paper in support of the motivation of MAWLR Budget for 2020/21 Financial Year*, p.2

A total number of 5,373 households benefited from the National Resettlement Programme, at a total cost of N\$2,3 billion for land acquisition, or N\$ 428,000 per beneficiary household (Minister of Agriculture, Water and Land Reform, 2020, p. 2).

This compares to 648 households that acquired farms under the Affirmative Action Loan Scheme, assuming that each household bought one farm only. The figure of 5,373 beneficiaries includes people who have been settled on group resettlement farms, such as Tsintsabis which accommodates 1,279 beneficiaries. Altogether 7 group resettlement farms existed in 2018, with two each in Hardap, Omaheke and Oshikoto respectively, and one in Otjozondjupa. A total of 1,030 households were settled individually (Namibia Statistics Agency, 2018, p. 42).

Willing seller willing buyer approach and land expropriation

To the extent that Government has not been able to achieve its target of 5 million hectares, dissatisfaction with the pace of land redistribution appears to be justified.

For many people, the main cause of the perceived slow pace is the “willing seller willing buyer” (WSWB) approach to acquiring freehold farms. This supply driven approach continues to be the preferred option of government to acquire land.

The Namibian Constitution and subsidiary land legislation also provide for the expropriation of private land for public purposes with just compensation. So far, only 5 farms covering 24,451 hectares were expropriated with compensation in 2006. However, expropriation continues to be regarded by some as “the silver bullet” to address the slow pace of land redistribution. Moreover, certain interest groups are mobilising support for expropriation without compensation.

Not surprisingly, the first resolution taken at the Second National Land Conference in October 2018 called for the “willing seller willing buyer” principle to be abolished and be replaced with alternative acquisition methods. However, while it was recommended to strengthen intra-institutional coordination in the expropriation process, to do so without compensation was not part of the resolution or any other.

While criticism of the “willing seller willing buyer” principle is justified in some respects, no evidence has been produced to show how it failed. This is important if government is expected to develop and implement an accelerated land delivery approach.

According to land reform policies, when white farmers want to sell their farm, they first have to offer their farms for sale to the Namibian government. Only when the

government issues a so-called waiver, are they allowed to sell the farm on the free market.

Data presented by the Namibia Statistics Agency (2018, p. 40) show that between 1992 and 2018 Government has waived 5,2 million hectares of land compared to the 3 million it acquired. The constraint therefore does not appear to be a lack of supply of land, but possibly institutional capacity and financial resources, for example. At the same time, many farms with good agricultural potential were bought by Affirmative Action Loan Scheme buyers and were thus never offered to the Ministry of Land Reform. This is the result of a policy that exempted farm owners from offering their land first to government, if they sold it to a buyer who accessed the Affirmative Action Loan Scheme to buy the land.

Has land reform improved livelihoods?

The extent to which access to land has improved the livelihoods of beneficiaries is difficult to determine. An assessment carried out in 2010 found that many beneficiaries of the National Resettlement Programme were able to triple their livestock numbers, but that most households sampled did not have enough livestock to provide secure livelihoods.

No data exists on how much income beneficiaries derived from farming operations. Available evidence suggests that many beneficiaries are dependent on off-farm incomes to sustain themselves. The 2010 assessment found that out of their limited sample, 75% of beneficiaries had access to off-farm income (Ministry of Lands and Resettlement, 2010, p. 37).

If these findings are correct, they suggest that off-farm income for resettlement beneficiaries is essential to improve their livelihoods, and it also confirms earlier research findings that many resettlement beneficiaries suffered from cash flow problems (Werner and Odendaal, 2010). This has not only prevented them from doing routine maintenance on their allotments but also precluded any farm investments.

The situation is compounded by difficulties of resettlement beneficiaries to obtain credit for land-based economic activities in the absence of formalised tenure rights. Land reform legislation provides for long term leases to be registered for resettlement allocations, but very few leases have been registered so far. Under Namibian legislation, the registration of any land title or long-term lease agreement must have a survey diagram, but a large majority of beneficiaries do not have these, as their allocated parcels have not been surveyed after sub-division.

Apart from the survey requirements, the absence of a land rental market is a further impediment to use leased land as collateral. Land can only serve as collateral if it can be sold by financial institutions to recover outstanding debts of defaulters. This is not permitted by law and is a major reason why commercial financial institutions do not accept land that is leased from the state as collateral. But even with formalised long-term leases, many beneficiaries are not likely to be able to raise loans, as they are unable to service them.

General support to beneficiaries is widely regarded as insufficient. The Farmer Support Programme, now managed by Agribank, provides training to some beneficiaries. It is, however, widely hoped that the amalgamation of the Ministries of Land Reform and Agriculture, Water and Forestry in March 2020 into the Ministry of Agriculture, Water and Land Reform will lead to the development of an integrated programme of land acquisition and distribution, and agricultural support services.

Paradigm shift

The realisation in 2008 that the settlement of asset-poor farmers did not yield positive results led the Ministry of Land Reform and Resettlement to call for a paradigm shift in selecting resettlement beneficiaries. By 2008, new resettlement criteria were developed which place much greater emphasis on the ability of potential beneficiaries to contribute to the national economy; this clearly favours beneficiaries with agricultural experience and a solid asset base. This may be required to improve agricultural productivity on resettlement land but is criticised by many as facilitating continued elite capture.

In 2015 the Special Cabinet Committee on Land and Related Matters (SCCLRM) resolved to revise the National Resettlement Policy in order to “bring about a coherent resettlement policy document that addresses the possible lack of efficacy in the existing policy” (Republic of Namibia, 2017). Although the draft policy has been submitted to public consultations, it has not been approved yet.

Elite capture

Allegations of significant elite capture of land reform benefits are widespread. There is little empirical data to support these perceptions and allegations, but a cursory examination of the list of beneficiaries advertised by the Ministry of Land Reform lends credence to these.

A significant number of the 5.300 beneficiaries of the National Resettlement Programme are employed in government service and elsewhere. These include

Regional Governors, Permanent Secretaries, Directors and other well-connected individuals. The resettlement criteria are wide enough to make this process perfectly legal, as one of the criteria to qualify for resettlement is to be classified as “previously disadvantaged”, regardless of income levels. In addition, landlessness is equated with poverty in the National Land Policy. On both counts, black Namibians without land qualify for resettlement regardless of employment and/or income status.

Second National Land Conference

A significant development in recent years was the Second National Land Conference held in 2018, preceded by consultations in all regions of the country. Its objectives included a review of the progress made in implementing the resolutions of the 1991 National Land Conference, taking stock and addressing the challenges encountered during implementation, discussing emerging land-related issues and coming up with strategic resolutions informed by the identified challenges and future aspirations of the Namibian people.

For reasons discussed above, issues related to land redistributive land reform featured prominently during the 5-day deliberations. Two issues that had received relatively little attention in policy debates about access to land featured prominently on the agenda: restitution of ancestral land rights and the urban land question.

The restitution of ancestral land continues to be a sensitive topic. A resolution taken at the First Land Conference resolved that such rights could not be restored in full. Although the phrase “in full” left some room to act, restitution was never considered until 2018, when it became a discussion theme in its own right.

The Conference resolved that Government should appoint a Commission of Inquiry on Ancestral Land to obtain a common understanding/consensus on the definition of ancestral land rights as well as to identify communities who lost land and the extent of such losses. Within six months, the President appointed a Commission of Inquiry as requested. It deliberated for a year and submitted its report to the President in 2020. The report was released in July 2021 and will be summarized further on.

The second important aspect of the Second Land Conference was that the urban land question was elevated to the central issue of access to land. This reflects the realisation that about 50% of Namibia's population now lives in 140.000 shacks in urban areas without access to basic services such as water and sanitation.

The huge and rising backlog of serviced land and housing has become a growing concern of the Namibian Government, and if left unattended, the number of urban shacks will outnumber formal urban brick houses by 2025 (Weber and Mendelsohn, 2017, p. 17).

In the wake of the Second Land Conference, an implementation plan was developed and resolutions are at different stages of implementation. The Draft Land Bill of 2016 is in the process of being reviewed in the Ministry of Agriculture, Water and Land Reform so that resolutions taken at the Conference can be incorporated where possible. It is not clear how this process will be concluded, and in particular whether the general public will have a chance to discuss it.

References

Minister of Agriculture, Water and Land Reform, C., 2020. Technical Paper in support of the motivation statement of MAWLR Budget for 2020/21 Financial Year. Vote 37 and 38.

Ministry of Lands and Resettlement, 2010. Poverty impact assessment of the various land reform programmes. Government of the Republic of Namibia, Windhoek, Namibia.

Namibia Statistics Agency, 2018. Namibia land statistics booklet. Namibia Statistics Agency, Windhoek, Namibia.

Nghitevelekwa, R., Shapi, M., Kambatuku, J., 2018. The land question and land reform in Namibia. Review of the implementation of Consensus Resolutions of the 1991

National Conference on Land Reform and the Land Question. University Central Consultancy Bureau (UCCB), University of Namibia, Windhoek, Namibia.

Republic of Namibia, 2017. Revised National Resettlement Policy 2018-2027. Author, Windhoek Namibia.

Minister of Agriculture, Water and Land Reform, 2020. Technical Paper in support of the motivation statement of MAWLR Budget for 2020/21 Financial Year. Vote 37 and 38.

Ministry of Lands and Resettlement, 2010. Poverty impact assessment of the various land reform programmes. Government of the Republic of Namibia, Windhoek, Namibia.

Namibia Statistics Agency, 2018. Namibia land statistics booklet. Namibia Statistics Agency, Windhoek, Namibia.

Nghitevelekwa, R., Shapi, M., Kambatuku, J., 2018. The land question and land reform in Namibia. Review of the implementation of Consensus Resolutions of the 1991 National Conference on Land Reform and the Land Question. University Central Consultancy Bureau (UCCB), University of Namibia, Windhoek, Namibia.

Republic of Namibia, 2017. Revised National Resettlement Policy 2018-2027. Author, Windhoek Namibia.

Weber, B., Mendelsohn, J., 2017. Informal settlements in Namibia: exploring ways to make Namibian urban development more socially equal, just and inclusive. Occasional Paper. Development Workshop Namibia, Windhoek, Namibia.

Werner, W., Odendaal, W., 2010. Livelihoods after land reform: Namibia country report. Land, Environment, and Development Project, Legal Assistance Centre, Windhoek, Namibia.

The need to find a forward looking approach

The Report of the Commission of Inquiry into Claims of Ancestral Land Rights and Restitution

After the second National Land Conference in 2018, the Government of the Republic of Namibia agreed on some further steps to find solutions to the burning land question.

One welcome step was taken, when on 15 March 2019 President Hage Geingob appointed a 16-member “Commission of Inquiry into Claims of Ancestral Land Rights and Restitution”, thus implementing one of the Resolutions of the Conference. The President appointed High Court Judge Shafimana Ueitele as chair of the Commission, with UNAM lecturer Phanuel Kaapama as deputy chairperson. A list of all members of the Commission appears at the end of this chapter.

The task of the Commission

Acknowledging wrongful ancestral land dispossession in the past and the need to find a forward looking approach towards a better future for all Namibians, the task of the Commission was to find a common understanding of ancestral land rights and to identify communities with claims of ancestral land rights and restitution.

To provide a basis for future decisions, the Commission was also expected to look into alternative measures to restore social justice and ensure the economic empowerment of the affected communities, including “a special provision in the resettlement criteria to fairly address the situation of the most affected communities”. It was furthermore tasked to formulate legislation to cater for ancestral land claims and restitution. (see Appendix J: “Ancestral Land Rights Claim and Restitution Draft Bill”)

Included in its Terms of Reference was also “to undertake desktop reviews, to interview and consult with key stakeholders and groups, and to visit any part of Namibia and relevant institutions”.

The submission

On 24 July 2020, Judge Shafimana Ueitele, the chairperson of the Commission, submitted the Commission’s comprehensive almost 800-pages report to President

Hage Geingob. For unknown reasons, the Office of the Prime Minister (OPM) only released the report to the public on January 21, 2021. (www.opm.gov.na)

The Report provides a host of important recommendations and findings, especially with respect to the different sentiments, expectations and disappointments of those Namibians who still suffer from previous and present loss of land.

In his introductory letter to the President, Judge Ueitele describes the appointment of the Commission as “timely and commendable”, citing an old lady in the village of Dordabis, who asked the Commission, why the Namibian government had taken almost thirty years after independence to send a Commission to hear about her pain of ancestral land dispossession. She ended her testimony with the words: “I can now go and die peacefully, as speaking to you has taken the heavy load that I have carried in my heart for years”.

According to Ueitele, the main objective of the Commission has been achieved. After listening, reading and analyzing 1,743 oral as well as written testimonies submitted to the Commission, in addition to incorporating a host of relevant literature and experts’ analyses, he states: “The Commission can with confidence state that this Report has laid sufficient ground for the Government, in consultation with the Namibian people, to now formulate the relevant legislation and policies on this subject.”

Key findings

In his letter to the President, Ueitele summarizes the key findings of the Commission as follows:

- There is a need to enact legislation to provide for ancestral land claims for restitution; this should include a body to assist claimants to formulate their claims, and a body to adjudicate land claims.
- There is the realization that, at the same time, “restitution in full may not be possible, as was mentioned at the first national land conference in 1991”.
- There are serious complaints by communities about “the failure of targeted delivery, efficiency and effectiveness of the land reform policies and programmes over the three decades since independence”.
- Issues were raised such as access, ownership, utilization and control by the majority indigenous communities “vis-à-vis the current ownership pattern where a minority controls the bulk of land as a result of historically discriminatory and unjust practices”.

DETAILED SUMMARY

Here follows a more detailed summary, based on the Executive Summary of the Report. It includes an overview of the structure of the Report, a summary of its methodology and its key findings.

1. Methodology

The Commission adopted a multi-pronged approach, starting with internal meetings at which the members of the Commission acquainted themselves with its terms of reference and to plan the process of inquiry.

The second step comprised the consultation of key stake holders to solicit their preliminary inputs, advices and expectations.

Thirdly, historical and legal studies were commissioned from experts to have a solid basis for later analyses and “to build a strong evidence base upon which to distil its later key findings and formulate recommendations.”

Fourthly, the Commission engaged and consulted with relevant institutions and different ministries.

As a fifth step, the Commission invited members of the public to make written submissions regarding claims of ancestral land rights and restitution, as well as to attend public hearings that took place in all 121 Constituencies across the country. The latter platform accorded members of the public the opportunity to present their oral testimonies, claims or recommendations.

Following this collection of data, the Commission held five retreat sessions to review the oral and written submissions and testimonies and to “synthesize some emerging issues and trends in relation to its Terms of Reference.”

2. Structure of the Report

The Report is divided into six parts.

Part A sketches the background of the work of the Commission that led to its establishment and describes the terms of reference and principles that underpinned its work. A second chapter describes the process adopted by the Commission to carry out its inquiry and analyses, leading to its main findings and key recommendations.

Part B consists of a literature review, focusing on a condensed history of Namibia in relation to land. The colonial era section provides details and data on the systematic dispossession of land from indigenous communities by the German and South African colonial administrations.

In **Part C**, claims of ancestral land rights and restitution are analyzed from a legal and human rights perspective. The Namibian Constitution as well as international, regional and national legal options and implications of ancestral land claims are examined, and international and regional cases are presented as lessons for the Namibian context.

Part D presents key social, economic and ecological data of Namibia. It highlights data on population dynamics, land classification and tenure systems, land ownership, land use, and ecological factors and their implications on land use and productivity.

Part E consists of a summary of the key issues emanating from the 1,743 written and oral testimonies of members of the public from all over the country, including a few cases from beyond the borders. It includes claims and testimonies from Traditional Authorities, Traditional Communities, interest groups, families and individuals. The chapter also presents some voices of the public through excerpts taken verbatim from some testimonies. A second chapter highlights issues that the Commission identified as requiring urgent attention.

Part F brings together the key issues from the preceding parts of the report and presents general and specific findings as well as recommendations. The recommendations are based on key issues from the testimonies, evaluated and analyzed against historical, legal, social, economic and global considerations.

3. Key findings of the Report

Concept of ancestral land

The Commission did not start off with a pre-determined definition of “ancestral land rights and restitution”. From careful review of the oral and written submissions and the commissioned studies, the Commission found that, apart from international law definitions, ancestral land rights have different meanings in different contexts in Namibia.

For example, for the victims of the 1904-1908 wars of anti-colonial resistance it means the right to reparations for land dispossession as well as for atrocities

committed against them, and the right to the territories of their ancestors of the pre-colonial area (before 1884).

For those in land disputes it means the right to protection from threats of loss of ancestral (present communal areas) land, the right to remain on currently occupied or perceived ancestral land and the right to fair compensation.

For other groups, it means the right to be like other communities and have land that is exclusive to the community and to be regarded as ancestral land.

International law defines ancestral land or “aboriginal title” as a right in land, one vesting in a community that occupied the land at the time of colonization.

Loss of ancestral land during the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial periods

The Commission was presented with a wealth of narratives regarding loss of ancestral land during the pre-colonial and colonial period as well as with land right losses in the post-colonial era.

a) Pre-colonial era

During the pre-colonial era, boundaries of areas occupied by different communities were not clearly defined. There was a high degree of human mobility, particularly in search of grazing and water resources. As a result, the oral testimonies and written submission by different communities were often laying claim to the same area.

There is also a lack of written or oral historical facts and empirical evidence with respect to the community territories and boundaries of the pre-colonial era.

The Commission therefore found that for the pre-colonial era, it is not possible to determine the exact sizes and boundaries of ancestral land between the various communities, although general boundaries and jurisdictions were in existence.

b) Colonial era

According to historical evidence, different Namibian communities suffered colonial land losses through “dubious land transactions, racially biased laws, proclamations, colonial wars, genocide and forced removals of black communities from their land”. This gave way to mainly white settlement and the arbitrary drawing of Namibia’s boundaries. Both the German colonial and apartheid South African regimes then

adopted policies and programmes to consolidate white settlement and created an agriculture-based industry, which Namibia inherited at the time of independence.

The communities that occupied the central and southern parts of the country, particularly the San, Damara (≠Nūkhoen), Nama, and OvaHerero were most affected by colonial land dispossession and lost most of their ancestral lands. However, the Commission found evidence, backed by historical facts, that all indigenous communities currently living in Namibia have endured land dispossession at the hands of both the colonial government as well as settlers, and thus lost ancestral land.

c) Post-colonial era

Land right losses during the post-colonial era mainly happened due to proclamations of urban towns and villages, national parks and other developmental projects.

Land reform after independence

The Commission found that despite the land reform programme adopted by the Government after independence that

- land distribution in the country has remained skewed in favour of a white minority;
- the pace of land redistribution is perceived to be “painfully slow and has fallen below the expectations of the majority of largely landless communities”;
- the National Resettlement Policy and land reform programmes in its current form lack adequate post-settlement support mechanisms;
- there is the perception that the current land reform programmes favour the rich, the powerful and the politically connected as well as persons from Regions regarded as having least been affected by past colonial land dispossession;
- there is general dissatisfaction, disillusionment, frustration, and impatience regarding the delivery, effectiveness and efficiency of land reform policies and programmes in respect of landless communities who are victims of colonial land dispossession;
- there is a lack of support (professionally and financially) to assist historically disadvantaged Namibians to become agriculturally successful and to improve food security;
- despite attempts by Government through the current Resettlement Programme to assist members of the San communities as one of the communities most affected by colonial land dispossession, these communities remain socially marginalized and economically excluded, even on resettlement farms that

were acquired specifically for them; some San communities which benefitted from group resettlement schemes have become victims of powerful individuals in the areas who encroach onto the farms allocated to them.

The Commission found the need for

- the **prioritization of the most affected communities** in resettlement policies and programmes;
- **checks and balances** through inclusive, transparent and accountable structures and processes in the implementation of resettlement programmes as well as land management in communal areas;
- the **formulation of special legislation** to provide for the processing of claims of ancestral land rights and restitution;
- the **protection and provision of tenure security for farm labourers and generational farm workers**; and
- the **protection of the gains achieved** as a result of land redistribution.

Alternative restorative measures

The Commission was also tasked to determine how ancestral land claims should be premised on the human rights principles guaranteed in the Namibian Constitution and on international and regional human rights instruments that are binding on Namibia. While these international treaties and laws recognize and articulate ancestral land rights and restitution, the Namibian Constitution does not explicitly make provision for them. However, a broad interpretation of the Constitution could indeed serve as a foundation for claims for ancestral land rights and restitution.

Based on the oral and written submissions, requests and recommendations, restitution of ancestral land rights and thus the correction of injustices brought about by historical injustices of land dispossession, can take several forms that are consistent with internationally accepted definitions of restitution such as

- restoration in full or in part of areas claimed as ancestral land;
- compensation for areas claimed as ancestral land;
- alternative land;
- renaming of places;
- beneficiation from businesses and natural resources on areas claimed as ancestral land;
- recognition of heroes and heroines, and erection of statues in their honour;
- community land to be regarded as ancestral home;
- preferential treatment in resettlement programmes;

- recognition in land reform and resettlement policies;
- erection of monuments in areas of historical, educational and spiritual value;
- access to grave sites of ancestors; and
- reburial of victims of genocide and wars of resistance;

“Unintended consequences of ancestral land claims”

Included in the Term of Reference for the Commission was also “the investigation of possible unintended consequences of ancestral land claims and restitution, as well as appropriate mitigation measures...”

The Commission identified inter alia the following:

- present title holders of land that is being claimed as ancestral land might feel threatened;
- the perceived demands for ethnic-based restitution and resettlement speak against nation-building and the constitutional provisions of free movement and the right to settle in any part of Namibia;
- the perception that other communities, particularly from the northern Regions, were not affected by colonial land dispossession, could lead to the conclusion that they should therefore not benefit from resettlement in regions inhabited by the most affected communities.

The greater part of the Report consists of 15 informative and detailed appendices. These include “History of Land Dispossession in Namibia” by W. Werner, “Ancestral Land, Human Rights and the Law” by K. Nakuta, “Results of the Resettlement Farms Analysis by NSA”, the “Ancestral Land Rights Claim and Restitution Draft Bill”, “List of Access to Graves and Gravesites Claimed” and the “List of Land Claimed”.

Members of the the Commission of Inquiry into Claims of Ancestral Land Rights and Restitution

Chairperson: **Shafimana Ueitele**, High Court Judge

Deputy Chairperson: **Phanuel Kaapama**, University of Namibia (UNAM) lecturer

Secretary to the Commission: Ms **Ndiyakupi Nghituwama**, Director of Resettlement, Ministry of Land Reform

Hon. **Gaob Immanuel #Nu-Axab /Gâseb** of the !Oe-#Gan community (Deputy Chairperson of the Council of Traditional Leaders)

Mr **Ryno van der Merwe**, President of the Namibian Agricultural Union (NAU)

Prof. **Helmke Sartorius von Bach**, agricultural economist and professor at the Neudamm Campus of the University of Namibia (UNAM)

Mr **Uhuru Dempers** of the Namibia Non-Governmental Organizations Forum (NANGOF) and coordinator of the Civil Society Organizations Working Group on Land Reform

Dr **Marius Kudumo**, Namibia University of Science and Technology (NUST), International Relations Director

Prof. **Lazarus Hangula**, former UNAM Vice-Chancellor

Rev. **Willem Konjore**, former SWAPO parliamentarian and Environment and Tourism Minister (2005-2008)

Mr **Neels Cooper** of Hoachanas in the south

Mr **Josef Petrus van der Westhuizen**, Chairperson of the Representative Council of the National Youth Council

Ms **Anna Frederick** of the village of Bethanie in the south

Ms **Nadia le Hané**, former Otjozondjupa Chief Regional Officer

Ms **Jeaneth Rimunee Kuhanga**, Board Chairperson of the Otjozondjupa Communal Land Board

Ms **Ingenesia Murangi**

Wounded by the past

Collective memory and ‘struggle think’

The affirmative action farm of Mr. Amushila and the resettlement farm of Mrs. and Mr. Vries illustrate what land reform could achieve. Through its two different channels, the Affirmative Action State Loan Scheme and the Resettlement Scheme, it provided land to people who, because of the colour of their skin, did not have the opportunity to farm in the commercial areas before independence.

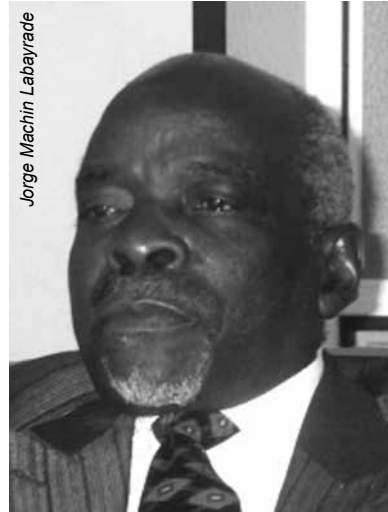
Both families mentioned practical problems on their farms, and they also agreed that land reform in general needed technical improvement, speedier and more efficient implementation and better control. But in principle land reform made sense to them, because they had clear ideas why they wanted land and how they wanted to use it.

It looks as if land reform could be something easy and straightforward. However, this is not what I found in general. Land is a multi-layered concept and often has little to do with straightforward farming and agriculture. It is a concept surrounded by a tangle of emotions, expectations and yearnings that are difficult to recognize, let alone unravel: Which emotions are really about land and which ones hide deeper longings? Which expectations could be addressed by government-led land reform, and which emotions will have to be accepted as part of a nation's burden of history?

“Why is land reform such an emotional issue?” - Taking the bull by its horns, this was usually my first question in interviews and discussions. Nobody ever replied that it was not emotional.

“For sure there are strong feelings,” said Prime Minister Nahas Angula (2005-2012), and everyone – ministers and pastors, black and white, young and old – agreed that this was true for the topic of land and its redistribution.

Jorge Machin Labayrade



Prime Minister Nahas Angula

It always went without saying that this intense emotionality revolves around 'white land' – land that was taken from black Namibians since the start of colonialism more than 100 years ago, and has been farmed and occupied by white settlers since then. I therefore placed mainly those emotions under a journalistic microscope that emerged when talking about privately owned 'white land'.

I was curious to learn if the answers to my questions would significantly differ between different Namibian groups. And would they be different for young and old?

Would there be understanding for each others' emotions, especially between black and white?

And if emotions around land are regarded as so powerful, what means have government, people and institutions developed to deal with them?

The prime emotion

Among black Namibians the most frequent spontaneous reply to my initial question "Why is land reform such an emotional issue?" was "because of the wounds of the past."

Vehaka Tjimune, at that time Executive Director of the Namibian National Farmers Union, answered:

"(Land reform) is emotional because of the historical injustices of the past. Colonial land occupation and the creation of tribal homelands by previous regimes influence how people view the present land reform process."¹²

Communal farmer and community activist Usiel Kandjii replied as follows:

"First of all, it is emotional because of the past: thousands of lives were lost when during colonialism land ownership changed hands, and the current hardships experienced in certain communities today are a direct result of the deprivation of their source of living, namely land, during that time."¹³

Some typical replies by other black Namibians were:

"We were chased off our land in the past, and we still suffer from this dispossession."

¹² See Interview 5: Vehaka Tjimune

¹³ See Interview 20: Usiel Kandjii

“Land reform is sensitive because during the past we were treated as second-class citizens and were not allowed to buy land.”

“Land reform is sensitive because we remember the wounds of the past.”

These replies were not unexpected. It was, however, striking how consistent the response was for all black people. Politicians and pastors, men and women, business people and farmers, young people and pensioners all named events in the past that evoked strong emotions in connection with land.

For black Namibians, two hurtful historical experiences stood out: violent land dispossession during German colonialism and the forced ethnic homeland policy during South African apartheid rule.

German colonialism officially started in 1884, when German traders were mainly interested in Namibia's minerals, cattle and game, while German settlers wanted land.

The northern regions of Namibia were more fertile and attractive, but there was the danger of malaria, and the areas along the rivers were densely settled by indigenous communities, organized in strong kingdoms. Settlers therefore turned their interest to the more accessible savannah in the centre of the country, and the semi-arid southern regions, which to European eyes looked almost empty. Nevertheless, they were occupied by the indigenous nomadic San, Ovaherero, Nama and Damara people.

Over a period of twenty years the newly established German colonial government, as well as individual settlers, entered into all kinds of manipulative treaties and land trades with local chiefs, leaving less and less land to the original occupants. Land that had been communally used by large nomadic tribes and clans for generations was suddenly partitioned into farms, fenced off and declared the exclusive property of foreign individuals.

In 1904 the Ovaherero¹⁴ rose against the German colonialists, followed a year later by the Nama, with the aim of regaining their lands. A brutal colonial war followed. Tens thousands of people were killed, and thousands Ovaherero fled into neighbouring Botswana. The survivors of the wars were forcibly removed from their land, deprived of their cattle and driven into newly named ‘reserves’ – overgrazed communal land – where they became an impoverished migrant labour force for the colonizers, and where they have remained poor until today.

¹⁴ In this study the term ‘Ovaherero’ is used to refer to the Hereros, Mbanderus and other Otjiherero language groups, while ‘Herero’ is used as an adjective.

Double dispossession

The second traumatic event in Namibia's colonial history was experienced with the end of German colonial occupation, when Germany lost the First World War. Hopes rose high among the Ovaherero and Nama that under the new British/South African administration at least some land would be returned to those who lost it to the German colonists. But these dreams were soon shattered. The end of the war merely paved the way for another foreign power. This time it was white governed South Africa that would deprive the indigenous population of even more land in favour of poor white settlers from South Africa.

According to the Namibian historian Brigitte Lau, Namibia after the First World War soon became a 'dumping ground for illiterate and poor white Afrikaners from South Africa' – an elegant way to deal with the embarrassment of poor and unskilled whites, who were difficult to integrate into the South African economy. Between 1920 and 1940, 32 million hectares of land were allocated to Afrikaner settlers, with generous cash credits for wire fences and boreholes. Another major give-away scheme was instituted after the Second World War, when another 7 million hectares, or 880 farms, were allocated to mainly white South African Union soldiers, who had served in the war.¹⁵

Because of their huge farms, high government subsidies and strong government support, many white farmers were soon able to become prosperous, and they began to dominate both the home and export agricultural markets.

In the 1960's a new move by the South African administration deeply affected the land and life of black Namibians. Due to the demand for industrial workers and domestic servants, black people from different ethnic groups had moved closer together in some parts of the country, especially the towns. There was cooperation, cultural exchange and intermarriages. Political resistance to apartheid rule started to develop and was gaining nationalist momentum. Ethnic differences were slowly replaced by solidarity among black Namibians against white oppressors and foreign rule.

But in 1964 the Odendaal Commission, set up by the South African administration, put an end to this growing unity and paved the way for the South African homeland policy to be implemented in Namibia as well. Based on the apartheid model of 'separate development', every ethnic group in Namibia was to receive its own homeland with a very limited degree of self-governance. The aim was to not only separate white and black in different, clearly demarcated areas, but also to

¹⁵ Brigitte Lau in a letter to 'The Namibian' under the heading 'The History of Land Possession', May 1996

separate the different ethnic groups according to the tried and tested 'divide and rule' principle.

The South African apartheid government did spare neither the time nor the money to make the Odendaal Plan a reality. The existing 'native reserves' were enlarged by more than three million hectares of land. Altogether ten so called homelands were established or consolidated, and the different ethnic groups were shoved about to fit the ethnic model like pawns on a chess board. Almost 30 % of black Namibians were once again forced off their land and moved to other areas, often over long distances.

The homelands became the only legal living places for black Namibians, who were treated like foreigners in the rest of their own country. Black Namibians, who wanted to move about or needed to cross white areas, had to carry passes, usually signed by their white 'baas' (boss).

Impressions of an artist

The well known Namibian singer Jackson Kaujeua describes in his autobiography 'Tears over the Desert' the emotions that were experienced by members of his family when the Odendaal Plan was implemented on the ground.¹⁶

After the Herero war against the Germans, his family had moved to the southern part of Namibia where they lived in a township together with Nama, Ovambo and other Ovaherero people. They stayed close together as neighbours, intermarried and helped each other. But the Odendaal Plan would change their lives forever:

"Why, Uncle?" the young Kaujeua had enquired when his uncle told him that they had to pack all their belongings, collect their animals and move.

"A new law has been passed that forces all Hereros in the south to move to the so-called Herero areas up north", his uncle answered. "This is the Odendaal law. All ethnic groups must be in their own homelands, away from the police zone which will be inhabited only by whites. So the story goes."

Kaujeua vividly recounts how one day the headman and his people were ordered to meet with some 'white men' from the South African government at a nearby village. At the meeting they were told that all Ovaherero people of their area had to move

¹⁶ Kaujeua, Jackson (1994): *Tears over the Desert*, New Namibia Books

with bag and baggage to the Herero reserve, because the government needed the land for mining purposes. Questions or consultations were not allowed.

"If you don't move, don't be surprised to see fences cutting through your kraals," was the unconcealed threat.

"We did not come here to be insulted and to be threatened like dogs," Kaujeua remembers his uncle saying. "We are also men with balls. They are doing again what they did to our forefathers." There were a few more meetings but in the end they had to pack their belongings and move.

Kaujeua describes how one day the removals were finalized.

"When we went home on vacation we demolished our houses and loaded the materials onto the government trucks that transported the stuff to Tses. They collected goods from all the villages ... It was winter and we froze for days as we awaited the train to the new land ...

We arrived in the afternoon. The place was crowded with tents for our fellow residents from the south. The whole area was scattered with fires which flickered in the dark like stars on earth.

Trucks carrying humans and animals, polluting the whole of Omitara with dust, drove to and fro. Meat was plentiful enough though, as the smaller animals had died in numbers by trampling each other in the cars all the way from Tses ...

Tranquillity and harmony eventually settled on the new settlement, though it was not easy for us and the animals to adjust to our new situation ... The cattle adjusted very well. But the small animals were wiped out in their thousands by a poisonous plant that grows among the grass.

'Oh heavens!' I overheard Granny murmuring as we were busy skinning goats and sheep that had died as a result of eating the poisonous plant. 'This world is not for these animals. For how long is this going to go on?'

A hundred years of violence

In 1990 Namibia became independent after 30 years of German colonialism and 75 years under the South African apartheid system. All racial legislation was abolished, various affirmative action measures implemented to create a racially integrated society, and for the past eighteen years Namibia has been a model of political stability and national reconciliation – a forward looking society.

The injustices of the past and the horrors of colonialism are still pointed to when it is politically expedient or when political correctness is required. But in principle Namibia has readily adapted to its role as a modern state with multi-party democracy, a market-driven liberal economy, and adherence to international laws and policies, at the same time accepting the influence of the international donor community and adapting to modern western lifestyles. For all practical purposes Namibia has chosen a path that leads into the future without too much baggage of the past.

And yet the past is right on the present's heel, when it comes to land reform. Why does it still cast such a dark shadow on all discussions and all emotions?

In general, it became clear during my interviews that emotions over land are not so strong because people lost their land, but because they were dispossessed in an extremely violent way. Land dispossession and tribal wars about land had always been part of history, even before colonial times, many conceded. It was not, therefore, land dispossession as such, but the brutal violence of colonialists and the apartheid regime that has remained in the collective memory of black Namibians as a wound that has not yet healed.

Emotions about the violence of land dispossession surfaced no matter whether questions were asked in a structured interview with officials or in casual conversations with people on the land.

Minister Willem Konjore emphasized: "If one takes into account the way the land was taken away and the way the land was governed, it makes it particularly sensitive and emotional."

Also most of the twelve young sociology students at the University of Namibia that I interviewed agreed that land reform was emotional, "because it was taken through the barrel of a gun."

What added to the severity of the wounds was that violent land dispossession did not only occur once, but again and again over a period of more than 100 years. What happened during German colonialism was strategically and politically used, continued and consolidated by the South African apartheid regime until independence. The pain of loss was thus never allowed to heal, but went deeper and deeper through repeated loss, repeated oppression and repeated humiliation.

This repeated violence was often cited as a reason why the strong emotions around land loss were passed down from generation to generation, as a young waitress, the daughter of Herero farmers in a hotel near Grootfontein in the north explained:

“If land is taken away from people very violently, then the following generations experience this violence as well.”

This was confirmed by a young university student, who had realized that the consciousness of the younger generation continues to be shaped by the unresolved emotions of their parents:

“The anger of young people about land loss is fuelled by their parents. It is recreated from generation to generation by their parents and grandparents.”

In this way the emotions around violent land loss are not decreasing in intensity with time, but are carried into the present generation and conserved as part of a community's collective consciousness.

“Because of the struggle”

Another reason why land has become loaded with emotion is because of the status it was awarded during the liberation struggle. While the most frequent answer to my initial question was that land reform was emotional ‘because of the wounds of the past’, usually a second answer was added: ‘...and because the long struggle for liberation was basically about land’.

That the fight for independence was the fight for land is still consistently propagated by ministers and government officials in public statements about land reform today, whereby land is usually not associated with specific ancestral land (as for the Ovaherero or Nama people) but more generally as a source of livelihood.

Sam Nujoma, Founding President of independent Namibia, repeatedly stated that the land question in Namibia was central to the struggle for national liberation. Also during interviews government ministers like Dr. Nicky Iyambo confirmed: “The struggle to free our country was about land.”

Nashilongo Shivute, Under Secretary at the Ministry of Lands and Resettlement echoed this view at a Land Conference in November 2006: “In Namibia ... the issue of land was probably the most important driving force for national liberation movements.”¹⁷ And Jerry Ekandjo, former Minister for the same Ministry, reiterated at the Regional Land Conference in August 2007: “The primary aim of the liberation

¹⁷ Consultative Workshop: Perceptions on Land Reform, 21-22 November 2006, Windhoek, hosted by the Legal Assistance Centre

struggle was to take full control of our ... land which is the key to social and economic development.”¹⁸

Also the majority of the 12 sociology students were convinced that the land issue was sensitive to their parents and grandparents because of the war of liberation. Although they themselves regarded the abolishment of apartheid and the attainment of democracy as the most important achievements of the liberation struggle, they were convinced that for their parents it was ‘land’.

A number of political and social analysts doubt that this is true, asserting that the centrality of land during the liberation war is a myth - a vague, but widely held notion that is not substantiated by facts or action. Malte Thran, a young German scholar, writing his doctoral thesis on land reform, even asserts that the “land question has become a fetish”, almost obsessively assigning importance to land without corresponding action on the ground.

One reason cited for this view is the fact that the majority of SWAPO supporters in the north of Namibia never lost land to any colonial government, as Wolfgang Werner, Rural Development and Land Reform Consultant in Windhoek, explained:

“Land reform did not play as central a role as politicians would like to make us believe. The main electorate of SWAPO, the Ovambo in the north, was not affected by colonial dispossession, and landless communities of other population groups have only very limited political power.”¹⁹

The inflation of the meaning of land

It is probably a realistic observation that land began to exceed its original significance during the long years of the liberation struggle. This was not only true for those groups who had lost the land of their ancestors, but for all black Namibians.

They all felt deeply affected by the humiliating homeland policy of the South African government: it had driven them into ethnic reserves like prisoners in their own country, while the rest of the country was reserved for whites. This extremely unequal distribution of land between black and white was felt by all indigenous groups, no matter where they lived, no matter how much land their ancestors had lost.

¹⁸ Southern Africa Regional Consultative Workshop on Land Policy in Africa, 29 August 2007, Windhoek

¹⁹ Werner, Wolfgang and B. Kruger: *Livelihoods after Land Reform*, Namibia Country Paper, March 2007

With time, land became an emotionally charged symbol of almost everything for which people were fighting when they spent long lonely years in exile, dangerous times in the bush braving the South African army, or staying at home – bearing persecution, imprisonment and torture. Land, more than anything else, visibly represented everything that was lost during colonialism, and it increasingly carried all hopes for a better life after independence in a free country.

“The long struggle for the land added to the value of the land,” said Professor Cheryl Walker of the University of Stellenbosch, and with time dominated all other aims of the fight for freedom. The unequal distribution of land became a symbol for all injustice - even when similar or even greater injustices happened in other economic sectors – and in the end the return of land epitomized the return of true independence.

After independence, land did indeed lose the central role foreseen for it in economic and political empowerment. Socialist ideals of ‘land for all’ and nationalization of agricultural land were soon abandoned in favour of a market economy. Other economic sectors such as mining, fishing and banking moved onto the centre stage of government plans for economic development, and land reform does not feature prominently at all in Namibia’s development plan ‘Vision 2030’.

But emotions that have grown in people over a long time do not change at the same rate as political ideals and economic systems – and the emotional connection between regaining land and true independence has vanished neither from the citizen’s heart nor from the politician’s speech.

Many black Namibians still feel that as long as the land is not fully regained, independence is not fully achieved:

“As long as so much land remains with white people, we do not really feel fully independent,” a black farmer said.

And a woman farmer confirmed:

“If you drive through this area and you know that all this land belonged to your forefathers, and now all these white farmers are still sitting there, even after so many years of independence, I wonder what people feel: they must be very angry.”

Former opposition politician Dirk Mudge confirms that this perception is still predominant among many Namibians, even though the ‘fight for land’ has come to a standstill:

“The fact that so much land is still owned by white farmers means that Namibia still does not belong to them, it still belongs to the colonialists ... decolonization has not taken place at the literal ground level. Namibians still do not own their land.”²⁰

‘Struggle think’ and collective emotions

During discussions, it was noticeable that emotions around land and the liberation struggle were usually expressed in general terms and in politically and socially accepted ways. Especially the older generation often expressed collective, rather than individual emotions, speaking of we and us, instead of I and me.

Usually only young people consciously distinguished between their own individual opinion and general perceptions as, for example, a university student:

“Yes, the struggle for independence was for ‘that promise’ of land – but I cannot identify with that.”

But it became very clear that strong feelings, be they individual or collective, associated with land loss in the past are still a reality in this country.

For me, as a German speaking Namibian, it was touching to learn that with respect to the wounds of the past around land, time did not play a role. The short 30-year period of German colonialism was experienced just as painfully by some communities as the long 75-year period of South African apartheid rule – even though German colonialism had already ended in 1915, while South African rule lasted until Namibia’s recent independence in 1990. Would land reform be a way to heal these wounds – ever?

It is obvious that the current instruments of land reform will never be able to return land to all Namibians whose ancestors lost land in the past. Even if all the farms that are still owned by white farmers were to be expropriated and redistributed to black families, this measure would merely satisfy a fraction of those 200,000 applicants or more who have registered as ‘land hungry’ Namibians at the Ministry of Lands and Resettlement.

While land reform might contribute to healing the wounds of individual farmers, it will not be able to heal the collective wounds of Namibian communities, or even of

²⁰ In: Hunter, Justine (ed.) 2004. *Who should own the land? Analysis and views on land reform and the land question in Namibia and Southern Africa*. Windhoek: Konrad Adenauer Foundation

the Namibian nation as a whole. This was confirmed by Bishop Kameeta during an interview:

“Land reform, as it is currently dealt with by the government and the agricultural bank, makes some people really happy; they are now resettled on an own piece of land ... But what our new government is doing is just damage control of what was done during colonialism, nothing else.”²¹

In the face of this situation, it was moving to hear how farmer Andreas Amushila was trying to use the wounds of the past as lessons for coming generations. When considering land expropriations in future, he explained, one should take into account how the violent grabbing of land in the past caused emotional damage over generations.

The present government therefore needs to be extremely cautious when taking away land from white farmers, Amushila argued, because it could create a significant obstacle to a peaceful and healed future. Conversely, sensitive land reform would enable the new ‘victims’ of land reform to remain emotionally unharmed:

“Expropriation must be done in a peaceful way. Otherwise it will create hatred, and that hate will not die. If something like expropriation is treated in a peaceful way, people will forget and forgive.”²²

²¹ See Interview 10: Bishop Zephania Kameeta

²² See Interview 12: Andreas Amushila

The yearning for ancestral land

Arguing with history

The common history of land dispossession, apartheid, and the liberation struggle has strongly united black Namibians. However, the painful history of land loss has also divided them: not all lost large parts of ancestral land and not all suffered violent dispossession and decimation of their population, like the Ovaherero, Nama, Damara and San peoples. Land and land reform is therefore more emotional for some Namibian groups than for others, or emotional in different ways.

This difference still strongly influences Namibian politics today, because it decisively set the course for future power relations. While the northern groups were able to continue growing and prospering during German colonial times, the Nama and Ovaherero people were decimated to a fraction of their original number and driven to a life in poverty and powerlessness. As a result they have remained minority groups in Namibia until today, with very little political power.

If the collectively expressed emotions around land reform were to be placed on a continuum, the emotions of one specific group in Namibia could be placed at one extreme: the yearning of the Ovaherero for their ancestral land.

The members of the Ovaherero community clearly see themselves as the Namibian group that has suffered most deeply from German and South African colonial dispossession in the past and, what is most important, from continued disempowerment in the present. Using the example of the Ovaherero, I therefore investigated in which way loss of land was particularly painful to this group.

For this purpose I interviewed both members of the Herero and the German communities living around the 'Waterberg', the prominent and historic mountain in central Namibia, where the decisive battle between Ovaherero and German colonial troops took place in August 1904.



Bishop Zephania Kameeta

As a German Namibian myself there was a certain measure of trust between me and the German farmers, but since they knew that I wanted to publish my findings, there was also caution about what to say, or what to state 'off the record'.

My Ovaherero interview partners were amazingly open, and even though the divided black and white history of our country stood between us, I was grateful for their sensitivity towards me as a white German Namibian. Surely there were things that remained unsaid – whether out of politeness or because the topic was too emotional personally, or too sensitive politically, I am not sure. But in general there was a willingness to talk and to explain.

“We got democracy, but not the land”

For the Ovaherero, the liberation struggle started with the war against the German colonialists in 1904, and continued in alliance with various parties until independence in 1990. More than for any other group, it was first and foremost about land. And not land in general: the main and only focus was the return of the land of their ancestors which they had lost to German and South African colonialists.

The fight for land overrode all other aims which might have been associated with independence, as Lutheran Bishop Zephania Kameeta expressed in a nutshell:

“For the Herero the liberation struggle was not about democracy, but about land. The struggle brought democracy and that is fine, but democracy is actually a foreign concept. The main issue is that the land of our ancestors was taken away and should be returned.”²³

The fact that ancestral land is not being returned in independent Namibia is particularly painful, because the Ovaherero community is a minority group with little political influence. In comparison with other ethnic communities such as the Oshivambo speaking groups, who are the dominant and politically most powerful faction in Namibia today, it is numerically small – a fact which is the more hurtful because it is seen as a direct result of the colonial wars more than a hundred years ago.

²³ See Interview 10: Bishop Zephania Kameeta

Shattered hopes

In the late 19th century, it is told, the Ovaherero inhabited large areas around the Waterberg, Omaruru, Otavi, Okahandja, Otjimbingwe and Gobabis. Pre-colonial times are seen as a time when the Ovaherero lived a proud life, not always peaceful, but with huge herds of cattle roaming the plains of central Namibia. They felt powerful not only because of their cattle wealth, but also because they did not feel subordinate to any neighbouring tribal groups, such as the Ovambo in the north and the Nama further south.

This changed dramatically and completely when Germany established itself as a colonial power in the central and southern areas of present day Namibia. After the colonial wars between 1904 and 1908, according to contemporary historians, 60 to 80 % of the Ovaherero people were killed or chased from their land. Survivors of the war, who returned to their home area later, were forced to settle in 'native reserves'. The pride and dignity of the whole Ovaherero nation was shattered.

The greater parts of the land of the Ovaherero, such as the relatively fertile land south of the Waterberg, were distributed to German settlers who started with cattle farming and soon became prosperous - although not for very long.

Only ten years later, with the defeat of Germany after World War I, South Africa took over the administration of the former German colony. As mentioned before, for the Ovaherero hopes arose that with a change of power they would regain at least part of their land. But, as for the Nama and Damara, their hopes were shattered all too soon. Not only was land not returned, but even more land was distributed to large numbers of poor white farmers from South Africa. The reserves later changed into so called 'homelands' under South African rule.

During all this time, continuing until today, members of the Ovaherero communities only had access to large parts of their former land as farm labourers on white-owned farms, or as employees of the state-owned Waterberg Plateau Park. For more than 100 years they have watched how more and more of their forefathers' land was developed as white-owned farms, many of which were handed down from generation to generation in German or Afrikaans families – and they have remained powerless until today to protest against it.

Closely following independence in 1990, it was clearly decided at the Land Reform Conference in 1991 that land would not be returned to individuals or groups who claimed ownership on account of the fact that it used to be occupied by their ancestors - but rather to draw a line under the past. For the Ovaherero this meant

that their ancestral land, occupied by white farmers for the past 100 years, would neither be nationalized by the state nor in any form be returned to them as a Ovaherero community.

The only instruments that became available to the Ovaherero to regain land were those of the government's land reform programme:

Through the affirmative action loan scheme, well-off Ovaherero would be able to buy farms with the help of state loans, albeit only if white farmers were willing to sell their land. Through the resettlement scheme less well-off Ovaherero could apply at the Ministry of Lands and Resettlement for a portion of a farm that had been bought by the government from white farmers.

Again, the availability of such land was dependent on the willingness of white farmers to sell their land to the government. In both cases land would only be allocated to individuals and not to a community.

The two available land reform schemes did not result in major areas of land being returned. According to communal farmer Usiel Kandjii this was due to the 'willing buyer-willing seller' principle of the land reform programme, which had failed to bring a sufficient number of affordable farms onto the market:



Usiel Kandjii

"There are many willing buyers in the market looking for land, but they end up being frustrated by abnormal prices, insufficient capital, government bureaucracy, and most importantly by the unwillingness on the part of the current owners to sell the land." By keeping prices of farms high, according to Kandjii, "commercial farmers are making sure that the yesterday 'have-nots' remain the 'have-nots' of the day after tomorrow."²⁴

In the midst of this competition for land, another factor is adding to the bitterness among the Ovaherero people. Although a number of Ovaherero farmers were able to acquire farms on the land of their ancestors, large areas were allegedly bought by people from 'other groups', originally from northern Namibia.

²⁴ See Interview 20: Usiel Kandjii

The dramatic decisions taken at the 1991 Land Conference now claimed their tribute: people without any ancestral connection to 'Hereroland' have the same right of access to the land as the Ovaherero, as long as they generally count among the 'historically disadvantaged'.

And not only that: the perception exists that the government even gives preference to people with the 'right' ethnic and political connections, instead to those who have been waiting for the return of their land for more than 100 years, as communal farmer Usiel Kandjii explained:

"A perception exists that the land reform process is used as a political tool and is not really benefiting those who should get access to land after independence."

Another Ovaherero farmer agreed:

"The majority of resettled people are from the Oshivambo speaking community, and also within this area, Oshivambo speaking people are resettled. But they are not the ones that lost land."

Festus Tjikuua, living in Windhoek, but also farming on communal land in eastern 'Hereroland', is certain that the Ovaherero people are the group that feels most hurt by the direction that land reform is taking, and that they are the most radical with respect to their demands for a faster pace of the redistribution process:

"They are very angry at what is happening, for example, in the Otjozondjupa and Omaheke regions – where people from other regions are taking over farms on land that was owned by the Ovaherero before German colonization, and where their ancestors are also buried."²⁵

Looking back at the past 120 years, the Ovaherero have in fact lost their land for the third time in history: first under German colonialism until 1915; then with the South African homeland policy until 1990; and today with a kind of land reform that essentially prohibits the return of ancestral land to the Ovaherero and – that is the perception – gives most of the available land to black people from other regions with powerful political backing.²⁶

²⁵ See Interview 24: Festus Tjikuua

²⁶ There are no records available at the Ministry of Lands and Resettlement or any agricultural offices on the number of Otjiherero speaking beneficiaries for either the Resettlement Scheme or the Affirmative Action Loan Scheme. Unofficial estimates are that between 40% and 60% of new black farmers in former 'Hereroland' are Otjiherero speaking farmers.

Cattle, land and identity

The Ovaherero are not the only people in Namibia who have experienced this triple disappointment – it is also true for the various San groups, the Nama in the south and to a certain extent for the Damara. And yet it seems that the Ovaherero have, more than anybody else, maintained an extremely strong attachment to their ancestral land – and their desire to regain it has not decreased but rather increased with time.

Why is this so? And how did this happen?

For the Ovaherero, land obviously means much more than a place to use for settlement and livelihood, whereby various factors play a role. One of them is the exceptional significance of cattle.

In Namibia it is common knowledge that cattle are as important to the Ovaherero as bank accounts are to most other people. This is the case for traditionally orientated and modern day Herero-speaking Namibians alike, as Tjikuua explained:

“Cattle are of utmost importance for Herero people. They have important spiritual and ritual meaning. At every feast or festive occasion cattle must be slaughtered, cattle must change hands, or just be nearby - at weddings, at the name giving of a child, at funerals. If there are no cattle at such an occasion, it is very embarrassing.”

Cattle are also a source of great joy, and looking at them and communicating with them can contribute greatly to people's well-being. During my farm visits I had observed how Herero farmers were working with their cattle, how they whistled to call their pride bulls and how they called individual animals by name.



Festus Tjikuua

Tjikuua confirmed that some Ovaherero men even like to talk with their cattle:

“Yes, some people have a very close relationship to cattle. They train them to listen to them, and to come to them when they call their names. They identify them by their sound. Some can also see – by the way the cattle are returning from the

forest in the evening or by the way they behave in the morning – what might be coming up, something that might happen in the future.”

The deep emotional connection with cattle was also illustrated to me when I travelled with Chief Alphons Maharero (1938-2012), leader of the Maharero Royal House since 1970, through Germany in 2005. He was the great nephew of Samuel Maharero, who united the Ovaherero people in war against the German colonial troops in 1904. The aim of the trip was to meet the von Trotha family, descendants of General Lothar von Trotha, who issued the extermination order against the Herero people in 1904, and to promote reconciliation between the two families. In addition the delegation also met representatives of the German government and German Protestant churches. The visit was returned by the von Trotha family three years later, when they travelled to Namibia.

We had travelled through Germany for more than two weeks, most of the time by train. It was winter and we rode for hundreds of kilometres past meadows covered with snow. Every time we saw a few cattle, Chief Maharero was extremely pleased and interested in how these cattle were kept, fed etc. When we came to the end of our journey I asked him, what he would like to see in Germany before leaving the country again. His greatest wish was to visit a German farmstead and see and touch some cattle.

It was not difficult to fulfil his wish and we soon found a farmstead right inside the small village that we were visiting. It was a dairy farm and about 50 to 60 fat cows were standing in the stable. When Chief Maharero saw them his face lit up as never before on the whole trip. He approached them slowly, started speaking to them and ran his fingers through the hair on their foreheads. It seemed as if he forgot the world around him. After this encounter he seemed more energized and happier, as if the cattle had given him strength.

Cattle and the humanness of a person

Cattle are an economic asset, they are instruments of social exchange, they are needed for rituals and festivities, and they are a source of joy and pride. But their most essential importance – and this is where the extreme importance of land becomes understandable – lies in their function of providing a sense of identity and self-worth to an Ovaherero - even to many of the younger generation.

“A man without cattle is not an adult man”, said government official Gustav Tjirere, when asked why he spends so much time and money on his cattle in the rural area, while he has a good job in town. And Tjikuua, who studied computer technology in

Germany and England, confirmed that, yes, cattle heighten the importance or worth of human beings:

“If there are no cattle at a funeral, it is like the funeral of a child. Also, for example, when a wife dies, the husband must return all personal belongings of the wife to the wife’s family. In addition, the husband’s family has to give them a heifer. There is a word for this heifer (Ongombe jOtjize) which is very difficult to translate into a European language. It says something like a ‘cattle for showing gratefulness for the humanness of the woman’.”

Cattle thus seem to increase or reinforce the humanness of a person; they attribute value to him or her as a person, an attribute that cannot be replaced by anything else that modern life offers, such as money, education or work.

This importance of cattle is, according to interview partners, not much different today than 100 years ago – no matter whether you studied economics in the United States or grew up as a herding boy in the rural areas. They are essential for the self-esteem of a community as well as for every individual.

Cattle have so much importance that in a way they are regarded of higher value than land itself, Assaph Kandjeo asserted: “For the Hereros, no value is attached to land, value is attached to cattle.”²⁷

But as you cannot keep cattle without having land, the two cannot be separated:

“The Herero people regard land and cattle as two inseparable things. Power is not directly associated with the ownership of large tracts of land, but rather with the ownership of large numbers of cattle. But of course to have cattle you need access to enough grazing land.”

Therefore, when 100 years ago the Ovaherero lost their land to the German colonial troops, it was an even greater calamity that they also lost most of their cattle, and with them their self-esteem and identity. And because the reserves assigned to live on were small and dry, they also lost the opportunity to substantially increase their herds of cattle ever again.

According to Usiel Kandjii, the restitution of large enough areas of land would therefore mean the restitution of identity, self-worth and power of the Herero community:

²⁷ See Interview 22: Assaph Kandjeo

“We lost land and cattle, and with this we lost our dignity. In order to restore our dignity you need a basis, and this base is always land.”

Land and ancestral graves

“For the Hereros, no value is attached to land, value is attached to cattle.”

Although I understood the essence of Assaph Kandjeo’s statement, it also puzzled me, as the Ovaherero are known to be particularly outspoken about regaining – not any land in Namibia - but ancestral land.

Bishop Kameeta, when asked to explain this contradiction exclaimed:

“No! This is not a typical understanding of land among the Ovaherero, and I am an Otjiherero speaking Namibian too! Ovahereros emphasize the land as the land of their ancestors, and land includes cattle, it includes everything. Just listen to their praise songs: Land of our ancestors, land of our fathers...!”

He agreed, however, that it was not primarily the agricultural potential of land that is important.

“Most people do not really want land because they want to do farming. They perceive the land as the place where their ancestors lived, and therefore want it back.”

The bishop was highlighting another emotional connection of the Ovaherero with land. Again this was nothing new. It is well-known that most Africans connect land with the idea that it is the place of their ancestors. With the Ovaherero, however, it is striking to notice that their feelings for ancestral land have grown stronger rather than weaker over the years, and that conscious efforts are made to keep the emotions around ancestral land alive. Several cultural, though highly politicized practices continue to contribute to this.

The German ethnologist Larissa Förster did some intensive research on the oral traditions of the Ovaherero in the Okakarara area. She investigated in particular how the concept of ancestral land is dealt with in songs and poems that are recited at important social occasions, and came to the conclusion that these play a decisive role in fostering the bond between ancestral land and today’s Ovaherero community.²⁸

²⁸ Förster, Larissa (2005). *Land and landscape in Herero oral culture: Cultural and social aspects of the land question in Namibia*. Konrad Adenauer Foundation

Oral traditions include, for example, the 'omitandu': traditional praise songs and poems. 'Omitandu' recall and praise ancestral places and persons and are often part of singing and dancing performances at weddings and funerals.

According to the results of Förster's research, there exist one or more 'omitandu' for nearly every place that was once inhabited by Ovaherero people in pre-colonial and early colonial times. They describe the land, its mountains and rivers, and usually link it to the names of their former inhabitants. In this way they have been storing the knowledge about which place 'belonged' to which family in the collective memory of the community.

These songs of praise are known not only to the communities that live or used to live at such sites, but also to the wider Otjiherero speaking community. Children and young people learn, sing and remember the pre-colonial settlements mentioned in the praise songs. Through their repeated recitals the memory of different sites are kept alive and the idea of the importance of ancestral land is transmitted and strengthened from generation to generation.

According to Förster the omitandu thus profoundly and continuously shape the perception and reinforce the idea of past Herero land ownership. They create a 'mental map' of ancestral land and again and again, wherever the occasion allows it, conjure up a time when these areas will be returned to their rightful owners.

Symbolic occupation of land

Another way to keep the memory of ancestral land vivid and alive is the use and meaning that the Ovaherero have assigned to graves.

According to Bishop Kameeta, graves change land into something 'alive'. Through burials and graves the land becomes 'human' and in this way an emotional bond is established between people and the land:

"Land is not something dead, land is alive. All our ancestors have returned to the ground, they are living in the land. Therefore you will find that people coming to a certain place will kneel and kiss the land."

The burial sites of important ancestors have always been regarded as particularly spiritual spots. They are visited to initiate communication with the ancestors and thereby ensure the well-being of one's community, family or household.

However, in pre-colonial times, burial sites were not prominently marked by graves or tombstones. According to Tjikuua, places of burial were usually chosen near a prominent landmark, or simply kept alive mentally in the memory of the families and communities:

“Older places of burial are not really marked by graves, though it was custom to bury, especially heads of a family, at a prominent place such as under a big tree or near another landmark. People knew where about their ancestors were buried, and it was kept in the memory of people, even if they later did not find the exact place.”

Also, Assaph Kandjeo explained that in early colonial times burial sites were usually not marked physically as Christian graves are, and people were not allowed to live near them:

“In the old times among the Herero people, if an elder died, people would move, because the person would be buried in the kraal, so you had to move because you must not see a grave.”

Today, graves of Herero leaders are prominently positioned as monuments in graveyards of towns and villages all over previous Herero ancestral land. This visibility of graves only started after 1923, with the burial of Chief Samuel Maharero in Okahandja.

By the beginning of the 20th century, Chief Samuel Maharero was generally accepted as the paramount chief of the different Ovaherero groups. He united and led them in their rise against the German colonialists in 1904. After the decisive battle at the Waterberg Mountain he was forced to flee to Botswana and was never allowed to return to his homeland during his lifetime.

His wish to be buried in his motherland in the town of Okahandja, the former seat of the dominant Maharero clan, was however granted by the South African administration. On 26th August 1923 a huge funeral ceremony, with more than 3,000 Ovaherero attending, marked the beginning of the well known annual Herero Day in Namibia.

By that time it had become clear to the Ovaherero that their new colonial master, South Africa, would not return the ancestral land that they had lost to the Germans. With the erection of a monumental grave for Chief Samuel Maharero at Okahandja they were therefore consciously and deliberately starting a new tradition, which assigned a totally new meaning to graves: they became a political tool which continued the struggle for ancestral land on a different level.

Assaph Kandjeo confirms this change in the meaning of graves after 1923:

“Graves only became important for the first time, when the bones of Chief Samuel Maharero were brought back from Botswana. Since then people go to the graves, touch them – it was a political move, it is not an old tradition.”



Assaph Kandjeo

Maharero's burial was soon followed by numerous similar Herero burials and tombstone unveilings. The institution of regular commemorations and parades in other towns such as Okahandja, Omaruru and Opuwo initiated a revival of Herero identity and spirituality – and more: the grave of Chief Samuel Maharero was also turned into an important and highly visible political meeting place right in the centre of a 'white' area. In a similar manner other 'white' towns were symbolically re-occupied by turning graveyards into meeting places with colourful demonstrations of Ovaherero historical land occupation.

The German historian Gesine Krüger²⁹ asserts that, since 1923, the graves of Herero chiefs were made visible through ceremonies and commemorative days to mark the ancestral land of the Ovaherero like points on a map. A geographical network all over Herero ancestral land was created, with graves as its nodes. It was a symbolic way of mentally reclaiming land that could not be claimed politically.

White farmers knew this, Krüger writes, and were very cautious when Ovahereros requested them to bury somebody on their farm. The German farmer Voigts, who owned a farm in former Herero land, for example, is known to have said in such a case, “Once you are buried on Voigtland (the name of his farm), then the Herero will say: This is our land. You know that, and I also know that.”

German farmers on ancestral land

Reclaiming ancestral land became more difficult and more complex with time, as German, and later, white South African settlers began to farm on land formerly occupied by the Ovaherero.

²⁹ Krüger, Gesine (1999). *Krisenbewältigung und Geschichtsbewusstsein. Realität, Deutung und Verarbeitung des deutschen Kolonialkrieges in Namibia 1904 bis 1907*. Göttingen

They worked on it and made it their new home, and many farms have since been passed on from generation to generation. Their attachment to the land has grown strong with time, especially as many developed their farms into highly productive enterprises and built beautiful farm houses and gardens over the years.

As time passed, the graves of the German farmers' ancestors also became part of the land. On some farms I saw family graveyards, where three generations or more were buried, and the graves lovingly taken care of. Just as with the Herero graves, tombstones and their engravings tell the stories of the dead – when they were born and when they died. Flowers, bushes and rocks from the farm area protect and decorate these final resting places.

"The graves of our German ancestors are an integral part of our land or of a farm," said Gerd Wölbling, a farmer near Okakarara³⁰. They are very important for the identity of the farmers and their rootedness in the farm. They also express respect for the achievements of the German pioneers."³¹

The fact that both Ovaherero and German farmers have developed a deep connection with their land through the graves of their ancestors was also confirmed by a Namibian German farmer couple, who had to sell their farm due to old age. The farm has been in their family since 1896. When asked what would matter to them most when leaving the farm, they replied:

"The only thing that matters are the graves here. But I think nothing will happen to them. Black people have respect for graves."

During the past one hundred years the land around the Waterberg has thus also become ancestral land for German farmers, and long-term occupation of the same land and graves of both sides have created an almost tragic link between black and white farmers in the 'Hereroland' area.

Both Ovaherero and German soldiers lost their lives during the colonial war,



Ancestors' graves

³⁰ Okakarara is a village east of the Waterberg in the former 'Hereroland'

³¹ See Interview 21: Gerd Wölbling



Harry Schneider-Waterberg

and are buried near to each other in graveyards at the Waterberg, Okahandja and other historic places. Members of both Herero and German families have been buried on farms in the 'Hereroland' areas for the past 120 years, and both groups know and love the land and regard it as their home.

All three 'white' farms that I visited in the Waterberg area were indeed long established German farms. Two have been in the possession of the family for almost one hundred years, the third one for thirty-six years. Like for the Ovaherero, their land is of economic, but also of strong emotional value to them.

Gerd Wölbling's farm 'Hebronn' has been in possession of the family since 1972. Originally land of the Ovaherero, it was confiscated by the German colonial government after the 1904 war and remained German and later South African crown land until 1954. It was then assigned to a poor Afrikaans family from South Africa, who again sold it to a fishing company. Thirty-six years ago, it was bought by the Wölbling family.

Gerd Wölbling's father died in 1984, and Gerd, today a farmer in his thirties, had to learn farming at an early age in order to help his mother to cope with the work load on the farm. After his schooling and studies, he moved permanently to the farm in 1998, and – if the family will be allowed to keep the farm – he will continue to stay there. He admits to a strong emotional connection with his land:

"My farm is an economic enterprise and must be managed like a business. But the farm is much more than a business. It is also my home. In other areas I feel like a stranger. But when I see the red sand, the termite hills, the trees, then I am overwhelmed by this emotion that I am at home."

The second farmer I visited was Harry Schneider-Waterberg, on farm 'Okosongomingo', near the Waterberg. 'Okosongomingo' is the largest farm in the vicinity of the Waterberg and property of the Schneider-Waterberg family since 1909. It was bought by Harry's grandfather, who came to Namibia 100 years ago

as a soldier and developed the land into a successful commercial cattle farm after the colonial war.

Before his death the grandfather determined that the farm should remain in the family for at least three generations. After his father, Harry Schneider-Waterberg is now the second generation in line.

“For me the final will of my grandfather means a strong obligation towards this plot of land, and I hope that my son will see it the same way.”³²

Also farm ‘Hamakari’ has been owned by a German family for about 100 years: the Diekmann family. It is one of the oldest German farms in Namibia. The great-grandfather, Gustav Diekmann, arrived in German South West Africa in 1908 with his huge family (13 children) as a settler and craftsman and bought the farm from the colonial government. His wife and his son Wilhelm, his grandson Gerd and other family members are all buried in a family grave on farm Hamakari.

Today Hamakari is in the possession of the first owner’s great-grandson, Wilhelm Diekmann. After one hundred years on Hamakari, the Diekmann family feels also deeply connected with this piece of land. They feel that after a century of occupation they also have ancestral rights to it:

“The Ovaherero were not in this area for much longer than fifty years when the Germans came. And my family has been here now for more than a century. The Hereros say, where Herero cattle have grazed, there is Hereroland! But now our cattle have grazed here for more than 100 years. So whose land is it?”

Attempts to understand

In spite of occasional anger, fear or misunderstandings, all three farmers try to understand the situation of both their Herero and their white neighbours. Gerd Wölbling knows about the deep longing of the Herero people to get their land back:

“We are sitting on a volcano here: Hereroland. I am thankful for every day that we manage to live here in peace.”

Wölbling has been trying to find peaceful and sustainable solutions to the land issue. Five years ago, he remembered, white farmers in his area could not even talk about land reform, as it was such a hot potato:

³² See Interview 23: Harry Schneider-Waterberg

"I suggested a strategy what we could do here in this area. At that time the farms that belonged to our farmers' association covered an area of 40 – 50,000 hectares of land. I proposed to give (sell) half of that land to the state within the next ten years – but that created almost a riot."

Today farmers in the area regularly discuss land reform in their farmers' associations.

"We have become less emotional and we can talk. In principle we know that land reform is necessary – and it is no doubt taking place. It is important that land reform is fast enough, but not too fast so that ... production does not suffer."

Harry Schneider-Waterberg's family has always been interested in the history of the Ovaherero. His father published several newspaper articles and a book on Herero culture. He had a close relationship with family members of the influential Chief Kambasembi, who died 1903, and with his successor Salatiel, who had returned in the 1930's from Angola to the 'reserve' near Okakarara.

His son Harry feels part of this family tradition:

"We carry a historic responsibility on our farms. There is, for example, an ancestor tree forest on our farm, something unique in this area, and we have to protect and maintain it."

This attitude also characterizes the Diekmann family. The situation on farm Hamakari is particularly sensitive. Various omitandu define 'Ohamakari' not only as an important historical Herero water place and settlement, but also as a battlefield. 'This is the site where people died at the place of war / the land where the people split' is a line from an omitandu quoted by Larissa Förster. These lines refer to the thousands of people who lost their lives during the flight from Ohamakari towards and across the semi-desert of the Omaheke in 1904.

When Wilhelm Diekmann's great grandfather arrived with his son on Hamakari for the first time, he found the place covered with old war implements, broken guns, and the skeletons of human beings and horses.

According to Förster's research, Ohamakari is marked as "the starting point of a long history of flight, expulsion, deportation and dispossession, to which the Herero community was exposed under both German and South African rule. Ohamakari has become a symbol of the genocide, like Okahandja symbolises the Herero society's resurrection after the colonial wars." For this reason Ohamakari was selected in 2004, the year of commemoration of the 1904 wars, as the venue for the festivities.

As the Diekmann family is acutely aware of the historical significance of their farm for the Ovaherero, they donated, a year before the commemoration, a piece of their farm to the Herero community, so that a monument and a cultural centre could be erected on it.

The Diekmanns have also tried to maintain good relationships with their Herero neighbours and are willing to share access to any sacred and historical places on it. "I try to view history from the perspective of the Ovaherero", said Wilhelm Diekmann, "I have respect for their holy or secret places."

On Hamakari there is, for example, an important historical water point, where the Ovaherero met and gathered on the evening of 11 August 1904, held a war council, danced, and took the decision to flee into the Omaheke and from there into Botswana.

"This water point has become a holy place," Diekmann explained, "and I have never refused any Herero access to this holy water point. In the year 2004, several Herero chiefs spent a whole week at this place; they camped there and communicated with their ancestors."

He also feels obliged to provide access to these historical places to the wider public:

"Every year groups of school classes and university students or young people from Germany come here, seeking an encounter with Herero culture. But completely free access to my farm is not possible – on the one hand because of crime, cattle theft etc., on the other hand because of safety. We go hunting here and we need to know who is walking around on the farm."



Wilhelm Diekmann

Wilhelm Diekmann knows that all these measures do of course not address the problem of land ownership. He understands the emotional ties of the Ovaherero

with their land, because he feels this deep connection with the land of his ancestors as well. But he does not really see a solution to the problem of land occupation in the former Herero area:

“The farms here are so old – and they are such a thorn in the flesh of the Ovaherero. They have been in white hands for too long. Recently a Herero man asked me: When are you going back? And he meant ‘going back’ to Germany! Even though our family has lived here for more than 100 years!”

The logic of land rights

Their divided history apparently makes it difficult for Germans and Ovahereros to see each other as individuals. In daily encounters there is indeed friendliness, humour and cooperation, but when it comes to land it is hard to move away from rigid ‘them-and-us’ thinking, and history stands like a wall between black and white.

German farmers are often regarded as land thieves, no matter whether they or their families acquired their farms 10 or 100 years ago, while present-day German farmers feel that they have a right to the land that they have bought or inherited in a legal way.

The following dialogue with a young communal farmer, when asked why land reform is such an emotional issue for him, illustrates an opinion that is not uncommon:

Farmer: “The current land owners did not pay for the land initially; the land was taken away from the original owners. But now the current owners are benefiting economically from the land reform process, because they get compensation from the government, or as willing buyers when selling their farms.”

Author: “It is very true that initially the land was ‘stolen’ or simply confiscated by the colonial government or white settlers. However, most white farm owners today do not directly benefit from this historical fact. They had to pay for their farms, and they invested a lot of money and work in them. It is true that they enjoyed the privileges of the apartheid area and had access to land which others were denied, but still, they did not get their farms for free. Quite a number of white farm owners even have huge debts with the bank and are still paying off their farms.”

Farmer: “I agree with you that the current land owners or white farmers are not the ones who stole and confiscated land from our ancestors. However, their forefathers did and they, the current owners, are the direct beneficiaries of those wrong deeds.

Over time they managed to redistribute the land amongst themselves and sell it at a price per hectare among one another.

Of course, nobody will ever stand up and say: the land on which I am farming, I got it for free. It was either bought by myself, or I inherited it from my parents, accompanied by a huge loan to be paid off, or I was forced to buy out my other brothers who were not interested in farming. These are the most general reasons which you will hear from white farmers on the subject of land ownership.”

Author: “Are these not usually true reasons?”

Farmer: “When I am talking about land that was stolen or confiscated by whites from our ancestors, I am referring to a group of people. What the whites have done with the land among themselves is irrelevant to me as the deprived one.”

U. Frey



*A view of the Waterberg from Farm
Okosongomingo*

An end to tribal policies

The Ovaherero community became politically powerless 100 years ago, and it has continued to be politically relatively powerless after independence. In the absence of political influence, monumental graves and annual commemorations at grave sites have thus become important political and cultural instruments for keeping claims to ancestral land symbolically alive and visible – and for even intensifying and extending them from year to year.

In this way, memories of ancestral land are collectively instilled in the youth and maintained by the older generations, and the wounds of ancestral land loss are being kept open instead of being healed and closed. What cannot be reoccupied and re-conquered in reality is kept alive and even strengthened symbolically and ritually.

The question arises, if with such an approach, any sustainable solution to the land question can be found, because government policy clearly does not support this argumentation as a basis for land claims.

Tribal or ethnic histories, and ethnically based interests, are rarely mentioned publicly in Namibia today. Too much harm has been done through forced ethnic separation during the time of South African apartheid. History books today portray the Namibian past as a history of fellow Namibians, and not of tribes, and depict the wars of liberation – no matter whether it was the Herero or Nama war against the Germans or the ‘struggle’ against South Africa – as a war of all Namibians against oppression and injustice.

The policy of government is clear and unambiguous on this issue, as confirmed by the ministers that were interviewed. Both Minister Dr. Nickey Iyambo³³ and Minister Willem Konjore of the Ministry of Environment and Tourism, referred to the Land Conference of 1991 and the policy of national reconciliation, and stressed that land reform would not consider tribal issues:

“As a national policy we do not deal with tribal restrictions any more, but we talk about Namibians,” said Minister Willem Konjore.³⁴

And Minister Dr. Nickey Iyambo confirmed:

“It is not helpful to continue arguing with history. It would be unthinkable to go back to pre-colonial times and start rearranging things, because where would you start and to whom would you allocate which land?”³⁵

It is a clear sign of progress that Namibia is moving away from tribal thinking after decades of ethnic division imposed by foreign powers. And yet, a national identity can only develop if all Namibians feel that they are profiting from it; and a common sense of history can only develop if the wounds of one group are seen as the wounds of the whole Namibian nation.

If the Ovaherero people still regard – and keep – the loss of their ancestral land as a deep wound, the Namibian government, churches, farmers and civil society should somehow find ways to heal them, and not ignore them with the excuse of national reconciliation and anti-tribal political correctness. As long as the yearning for the land of the ancestors is not addressed in one way or another, the Ovaherero will continue to focus on the past and pass on their anger and bitterness from one generation to the next.

³³ Dr. Nickey Iyambo was Minister of Agriculture, Water and Forestry until April 2008 and then became Minister of Safety and Security

³⁴ See Interview 3: Minister Willem Konjore

³⁵ See Interview 2: Minister Dr. Nickey Iyambo

It is not clear how far these arguments influence even the younger generation. From talks with both young and old people, apparently more and more young people start to be unnerved by their elders' focus on the past and are tired of carrying the baggage of the past with them, as a young male university student expressed:

"We must not reverse but move forward, we must move past the bitterness."

This young man is able to express such an opinion, because as a university student he is provided with opportunities that go beyond land reform. Changing the focus from the past to the future is only possible if people are given a vision for the future. It seems obvious that land reform in its present form cannot provide this vision for the Ovaherero.

Negotiations between Germany and Namibia

In 2015, Germany formally acknowledged that the atrocities committed by the colonial forces in German South West Africa between 1904 and 1908 constituted a genocide. Since then, it has been negotiating a restorative justice deal with the Namibian government, signaling its readiness to make compensation payments. This could possibly set a global precedent as it would be the first time that a former colonial power negotiated with a former colony to find a comprehensive agreement about its colonial legacy.

Numerous representatives of the Ovaherero and Nama are dissatisfied with this procedure, arguing that Germany should be talking not just to the Namibian government, but also directly to Herero and Nama leaders, such as Herero paramount chief Vekuii Rukoro and members of the Nama Traditional Leaders Association (NTLA).

In the meantime, also an initiative was launched by German-speaking Namibians to discuss the past, both among themselves and together with Herero and Nama representatives.

By May 2021, the negotiations between Germany and Namibia were reported to have come to a conclusion and Germany's President to be ready to submit a formal apology to the Namibian people in the National Assembly in Windhoek. A substantial amount of funds is said to be available for restitution in various forms so that the social and economic consequences of the colonial war, through loss of life and loss of land and cattle, that are still felt today by the affected groups like the Nama, Ovaherero, Damara and San, can be at least partly be mitigated and healed.

At present (May 2021), it is not yet known, how the funds that will be released by the German government would help to speed up land reform in Namibia, and, in particular, how these funds can contribute to addressing the issue of ancestral land claims as expressed during the Second Land Conference in Namibia in 2018 and in which way the communities most affected by the genocide will be prioritized with respect to land reform within the framework of government policies. It is expected that also other restorative measures except land redistribution are planned and agreed upon to achieve healing and at least partly the correction of injustices of land dispossession in the past.

White wounds and fears

A hundred years of gain and loss

By the nature of the historical situation, the group that has most to lose from present day land redistribution in Namibia is the white section of the population. Losing their land through expropriation is indeed the greatest fear of white farmers. Looking back in history, they are not facing this fear for the first time.

Usually white settlers in Namibia are seen as a group of people whose ancestors came to Namibia after the turn of the 20th century, settled down after the colonial wars, and since then have lived prosperously and peacefully in their new country. Few Namibians are aware of the fact that white farmers also look back at a history of land dispossession, of ups and downs, of hope and despair.

In particular, farmers of German descent were repeatedly confronted with painful loss of land. Although they were among the victors of colonial wars and beneficiaries of colonial and apartheid laws, they more than once experienced the loss of their home and land during the past century, often after they had worked and made a home for their families on the land for decades.

When white Namibians were asked to name the most important reason why land reform was such an emotional issue, their own 'wounds of the past' were not usually mentioned first. Other factors like the violent land grabs in Zimbabwe and the fear of being expropriated were more prominent in discussions. But those, whose families had been directly affected by land losses in the past, vividly remembered them.

Victims of changing politics

After the colonial wars of 1904-1907 in Namibia, the German colonial administration confiscated huge areas of land from the Ovaherero and Nama people, cut it up into large farms which were then sold to German settlers at favourable prices. These settlers, often young men who had served in the German colonial forces, started to build up these farms under extremely difficult circumstances. With only a couple of livestock, no water points, no house, no garden and no fences, everything had to be built from scratch. Nothing was familiar, nothing was known: the harsh and dry climate, the fauna and flora, diseases and plagues, the remoteness and the sometimes unbearable loneliness.

But many farms soon became prosperous. The foundation of this prosperity was not only hard work and determination, but also a deep love of their new homeland that farmers developed with time. In diary notes and stories many a farmer or farmer's wife describe how only the deep emotional ties with their land made it possible to bear 'the hardships of the wilds and the lonely existence'.³⁶

But even the remotest farm in the southwestern part of Africa was affected by international politics, when in August 1914 Imperial Germany declared war on Russia and France. Soon many European countries and their colonies were dragged into the mire of the First World War. The Union of South Africa sided with Great Britain, and in 1915 South African troops defeated the colonial German 'Schutztruppe' in their neighbouring country. German South West Africa ceased to exist as a German colony.

South Africa took over its administration, and at the end of the war in 1918 about half of the German population in South West Africa was deported back to Germany, among them hundreds of farmers. Their farms were expropriated by the South African administration, often arbitrarily, without any transparent reasons. By 1920 almost 5 000 Germans were forcibly repatriated, while a further 1,433 left the former German colony voluntarily, because life under South African rule had become difficult.

A number of Germans remained in the country and tried to return to their farms after the war, because their whole heart was attached to this piece of land, but many found their farms completely destroyed by South African troops. They laboriously rebuilt their homes, fences and boreholes, but this did not save them from being repatriated to Germany a few years later.

During the war and its aftermath those Germans who remained in the country were regarded and treated as enemies by the South African administration. But they were also white, and this was reason enough to grant them the same rights as South African whites only a few years later and even pay them compensation for land expropriation.

However, this amicable solidarity did not last long. With the beginning of the Second World War, Germans in Namibia once again became enemies in their own country overnight. 1,220 German men of the approximately 10,000 Germans in Namibia were interned in Andalusia, South Africa. Others were placed under house arrest on

³⁶ Kanzler, Sven-Eric (2006): *Expelled from a Beloved Country*, Nature Investments (Pty) Ltd, Windhoek, p. 53

their own farms or expropriated, and a number of Germans, who had become South African citizens in the meantime, were denaturalized.

The first land reform in Namibia

By 1948, with the German-friendly National Party coming to power in South Africa, the German community once again became rehabilitated and was integrated into the white and privileged section of the racially divided society in Namibia.

And yet, this did not mean that the ownership of white farms was safe. In the 1960's, when South Africa implemented their apartheid homeland policy in Namibia, it did not hesitate to sacrifice white farms in the process. Land loss was experienced for the third time in half a century when a number of white farmers had to sell their farms to the government to make way for the enlargement and consolidation of ethnic homelands through the Odendaal Plan.³⁷

Within the frame work of the Odendaal Plan more than 3 million hectares of white owned land was expropriated. More than 220 white farms were purchased by the state for the purpose of enlarging the Damaraland homeland alone. The mostly German and Afrikaans speaking farmers did not have a choice or say in this. There was no 'willing seller' principle – just a 'willing buyer': the South African government.

In one way the current land reform is a small threat to white farmers in comparison with the Odendaal Plan. It was a straightforward and fast-track government expropriation process, without a choice whether to sell or not, and no option of appeal to the courts.

Farmers who were expropriated were well compensated in cash or by a farm in another area. But this did little to alleviate the deep sense of loss that farmers experienced. By then, many farms had been in the possession of the family for three or more generations.

An elderly farmer, Mr. Nel³⁸, whose first family farm was near Gibeon in the south, described how he and his family had packed all their belongings, with tears in their eyes: "My parents had worked themselves to death to build up that farm. There was nothing when they came, and they lived in a one-roomed house for years before they were able to build a proper house. Every year, when there was enough money,

³⁷ See page 69 Impressions of an artist

³⁸ Name changed

a new room would be added ... losing all that was really hurtful, and the new farm never meant the same to us.”

The pain of losing their beloved farms was often compounded when expropriated farmers heard that their farms had fallen into ruin. The expropriated farms were quite often dry and barren, but they could boast high quality infrastructure that had been developed through hard work, technical skills, and last but not least, through strong government support and subsidies over several generations. The resettled black farmers, however, received neither the training nor the finances to run these commercial farms successfully.

Despite their pain caused by loss of land, white farmers never experienced the same degree of disrespect related to the Odendaal Plan as their black compatriots. They were informed in detail of what and why things were to happen, they were even consulted to a certain degree and amply compensated. They were soon able to develop their new farms into prosperous enterprises because of cheap labour, access to subsidized credit, and professional government extension services.

And yet, when land reform took its course after independence, and when the first white farm was expropriated by the new Namibian government, hurtful memories of ‘Odendaal’ surfaced and are continuing to play a role when white farmers are discussing their situation in the new Namibia. Although they belonged to a privileged population group for most of the past 100 years, as individual families they have also suffered land loss and dispossession.

Not another Zimbabwe!

White farmers’ families in Namibia have not only experienced expropriation in the past; they are also observing it with horror in the present in their neighbouring country Zimbabwe. Indeed, the most frequent reason mentioned by white Namibians – and also by some black Namibians – why land reform was such an emotional issue, was ‘because of what happened in Zimbabwe’.

“There are the very negative feelings that we will go the same way as Zimbabwe”, said Schalk Pienaar, Moderator of the Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church in Namibia; and also Veronica de Klerk, Director of Women’s Action for Development, sees land reform mainly as very sensitive because of “Zimbabwe – where land reform was ploughed into the political arena.”³⁹

³⁹ See Interview 11: Schalk Pienaar

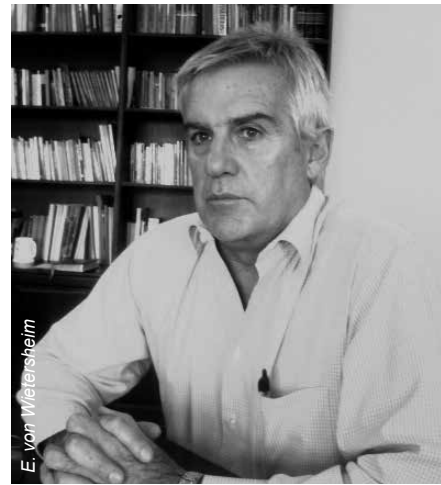
In Zimbabwe more than 4,000 (80%) of white farmers have left or were chased off their farms. Commercial farming has largely broken down, and more than 200 000 former farm workers are now both landless and jobless. Three million Zimbabweans have left their country, the inflation rate is the highest in the world, unemployment is around 80%, and almost 6 million citizens depend on food aid. (May 2008)

The land reform disaster in Zimbabwe is indeed casting a dark shadow on Namibia and other neighbouring countries, and white farmers fear that under certain circumstances land reform might one day end in similar violent land grabs and economic break-down, as in the former bread basket of southern Africa.

In Namibia today, the situation is different to Zimbabwe in many ways. Agriculture is less important for the total economy of the country. The most fertile land for crop production, in the north of the country, has remained in the hands of the black population. And the Namibian government has consistently kept a market related approach to land reform. There are not many indicators that Namibia will go 'the Zimbabwean way'.

Also many black Namibians, including members of the government, clearly oppose Zimbabwe-style land reform, although public criticism of Zimbabwe is played down or heavily veiled. When bidding farewell to the Ministry of Lands and Resettlement in March 2005 as its minister, the newly elected head of state, President Pohamba, pointed out that the SWAPO government would do everything to avoid what he called 'a revolution'. Although he never mentioned Zimbabwe, it was clear that by 'revolution' he meant the violent land grabs in his neighbouring country. He confirmed that the government was determined "to put breaks (sic) to a revolt about land" and would continue to embark on strategies for acquiring land peacefully from white farmers.⁴⁰

And yet, the land grabs in Zimbabwe remain the nightmare of many white Namibian farmers – not so much because there are signs of similar developments in Namibia,



*Reverend Schalk Pienaar,
Moderator of the Synod of the
Dutch Reformed Church in
Namibia*

⁴⁰ 'The Land', Ministry of Land and Resettlement, March 2005, Volume 9, Issue 1

but because it has remained a mystery to whites why president Robert Mugabe is allowed, both by his people and by neighbouring countries, to continue driving his country into what they described as 'total disaster'.

And more than that: Given that Zimbabwe's economy is in tatters, that it has been shaken with political violence and oppression, and that President Mugabe has internationally tainted the image of Zimbabwe – and of Africa – white farmers are scratching their heads in disbelief over how Zimbabwe's president of 28 years still commands respect and continues to be a hero of the liberation struggle in the eyes of many Africans.

Is it his continued defiance of meddling and control from outside such as from the former colonial power, Great Britain? Is it his seniority as an African fighter for liberation? Is it his political shrewdness? Or is it some dark mysterious African trait that will always be a mystery for whites?

The seemingly passive reaction of Zimbabwean citizens and the moral support for Mugabe by African neighbours, including Namibia, is therefore often interpreted as some form of highly irrational, unpredictable behaviour, fuelled by incomprehensible emotions which might also be simmering in Namibia – waiting to be awakened when the time is ripe. The greatest fear of white farmers therefore remains the fear of arbitrary or even violent expropriation – if not now, possibly later.

The fear of losing one's 'Heimat'

But even while Namibia remains a peaceful country, and even if land reform continues to proceed within the framework of the law and government policies, farmers are still suffering from uncertainty related to possible expropriation.

Article 16 of the Namibian Constitution recognizes private property rights, but also clearly stipulates that the state may expropriate private property in the public interest. With respect to land reform this clause is usually translated as the right of the government to expropriate white farms for the benefit of black citizens. The greatest fear of white farmers, and especially of those who permanently live on their land, is therefore the fear of losing their farm during the land reform process – although 'just compensation' would be paid. Why this fear?

Contrary to the belief among many landless Namibians, commercial farming has never been a short and easy way to wealth. Most white owned farms lie in the

central and southern regions of Namibia, in the most arid areas south of the Sahara, where farming is costly, complex, and often a lonely business. It involves high risks such as unpredictable droughts, veldt fires and animal diseases - and without hard work, perseverance and a deep passion for farming, failure is almost certain. For the majority of white farmers the fear of losing their farm through land reform is therefore not the fear of losing a goldmine. It is primarily the fear of losing their home, their roots, their 'Heimat'.

The longer farmers have lived and worked on the land, the stronger this attachment seems to become. With every wall they build, with every metre of fence they draw, with every borehole they drill and every tree they plant, they connect themselves more intensely with their farm until it becomes part of their identity.

"The emotional ties with a piece of land are growing from year to year," asserted farmer Harry Schneider-Waterberg. "In the beginning I saw this farm as a business as any other. But by building up this farm I started to identify with it ... Today I could not be happy anywhere else."

Indeed, many farmers cannot imagine living anywhere else than on their farm. "If I had to leave this farm, it would really be bad. I do not have a connection to any town; I would not know how to live there," said Markus Berner, who owns a small farm near Nina, east of Windhoek.

For him, the strong attachment to his land does not even mean that he should continue owning it. Berner would also be happy to work as a farm manager, no matter whether his boss would be black or white. "I would not have any problem with that. I would immediately accept a job as a farm manager for a black farmer, if that would mean that I could stay on the farm. For me ownership as such is not so important, but living on the farm."

The emotional ties of Namibian farmers to their land often override all economic considerations. Many a farmer would have given up farming long ago, if they had seen their farms merely as an economic unit.

Reimer Thiessen, a cattle farmer in central Namibia, when asked why he became a farmer, answered:

"I have a very strong emotional connection to this farm, because I grew up here. From a financial point of view, farming, in terms of return on investment, is definitely

not a lucrative business. Also the uncertainty regarding security of ownership of land as a white farmer needs to be remembered. But all this is outweighed by the emotional factors.”

For most farmers the fear of losing their home goes hand in hand with the fear of losing their livelihood, as they depend on their farms for earning an income. There are a number of so called ‘hobby farmers’ – usually professional and business people living in towns, who use their farms for recreation, hunting, or to set off against tax. The majority are, however, full-time farmers without additional assets, and only one home. Often they do not have a pension fund, sometimes not even a medical fund, and many have debts to pay off.

“The average white farmer relies on agriculture for his bread and butter,” confirmed Oliver Horsthemke, an agricultural consultant. Even though expropriated farmers would be compensated financially by the government, many would not be able to continue paying off their debts, finance their retirement, find a new job or continue with their present lifestyle.

Of course the worries of white farmers might seem negligible in comparison to the situation of the majority of Namibians, who are very poor. But will expropriation of white farms really contribute to alleviating their poverty?

Farmers are not convinced that their farms, once purchased or expropriated by government through the land reform programme, will be utilized for the welfare of landless and poor Namibians. They have seen such farms lying empty for months, either vandalized or simply gone to the dogs. When they are finally handed over, the black farmers often do not have the means and know-how to repair the dilapidated infrastructure, and are unable to live off the meagre farming income, so the farms continue to disintegrate.

“Often the infrastructure of the farms purchased by the government is completely broken before farmers are resettled on these farms. I have just seen such a farm in the Karibib area – all the farm gates are missing and the fences and buildings are all destroyed,” said Harald Koch, Acting Director of Rural Water Supply, in the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry.

Living in uncertainty

So far (September 2008 and also up to 2021) only five white farms have been expropriated, a ridiculously small number after 31 years of independence. All other farms that changed ownership from white into black hands (around 1,500 by 2021) were sold voluntarily by white farmers on the willing-seller basis. In the face of this small number, why are farmers still so worried?

Most farmers do not have problems accepting and even supporting a government-led land reform programme. What they do find hard to cope with is the uncertainty around the government's expropriation plans and its expropriation criteria, and that they have been left in the dark about their future.

"If I would know when and how expropriation would hit me, if I knew how to prepare myself for change, land reform would not be so ominous," a farmer explained.

At the National Land Conference in 1991 clear guidelines for expropriation were developed and accepted by consensus. It was, for example, recommended to the government that – should expropriation take place – criteria should be used that would earmark under-utilised farms, foreign-owned farms or farms with excessive land.

In 2005, 15 years after independence, the first farm in Namibia was expropriated: Ongombo West, owned by a German Namibian family. This by itself would not have disturbed white farmers – after all, farm expropriations had been expected much earlier. What did disturb them was that Ongombo West was a well developed and profitable farm, and definitely not falling into any of the categories suggested for expropriation. Also, the manner in which expropriation took its course confirmed fears that land reform might be used as a political tool.

Also, the manner in which expropriation took its course confirmed fears that land reform might be used as a political tool.

After an ugly labour dispute between the farmer and some farm workers, which was widely published in the media, the expropriation order appeared to come directly from the then president of Namibia, Sam Nujoma, who stated at a May Day rally that "some of the whites are behaving as if they came from Holland or Germany. Steps will be taken and we can drive them out of this land. We have the capacity to do so."⁴¹ As there were no other criteria visible or given in explanation for this

⁴¹ Harring, S.L. & W. Odendaal (2007). *No Resettlement Available*, Windhoek: Legal Assistance Centre. p.4.

particular expropriation, it was seen as a despotic and punitive measure by the government.

A few months earlier, in 2004, the Ministry of Lands and Resettlement had also sent 'expropriation letters' to 16 white farmers, instructing them to sell their farms or have them expropriated. Again, no comprehensible criteria for targeting these specific farms were apparent, and many white farmers started to live in fear and uncertainty.

Sakkie Coetzee, then executive manager of the Namibian Agricultural Union (NAU), confirmed that the main fear of farmers is grounded in the uncertainty around expropriation: "Uncertainty is the worst. People want to know what to expect."⁴²

Because of uncertainty and fear many white farmers are reluctant to invest further in their farms – either in money or in sweat. They are not only uncertain as to if and when they might lose their farms, but also about how they will be compensated for past and future investments. Although by law farmers have to be 'justly compensated' when government expropriates farms, there is also no clarity on what this means in terms of infrastructure.

"I am worried," said Wilhelm Diekmann of the Waterberg area in central Namibia. "I hate this uncertainty. I would really love to work hard on my farm, invest, start new things, but if you are left hanging like this..."

Harald Koch of the Ministry of Agriculture has observed how this uncertainty also leads to the neglect of farms:

"I know farmers who say: I do not know if I will be expropriated tomorrow and therefore I will invest no longer in the infrastructure of my farm. I just take out as much as I can. When such a run down farm is expropriated, it is not of much use to anybody, because it needs to be built up from scratch."⁴³

Namibia Agricultural Union president Reimar von Hase confirmed this:

"The announcement of more expropriations has led to a reduction of investment. If somebody is unsure if they will be expropriated sometime during the next years, (he) merely does what is needed to keep the farming business going, nothing more."

⁴² See Interview 8: Sakkie Coetzee

⁴³ See Interview 4: Harald Koch

Coming to terms with expropriation

How do farmers come to terms with a sword of Damocles – expropriation – hanging above their heads? And how do they come to terms with an insecure future?

Some farmers are desperate and bitter, others simply helpless or resigned. However, more farmers than I expected are trying hard to remain positive and confident and have developed different ways of coming to terms with the fact that their land may not belong to them forever.

For a number of farmers it was helpful to focus less on the emotional bonds with their land, and instead accept the government's land policy and consider possible alternatives of earning a living. Of course this was easier for farmers who were financially well-off, and who in addition had benefited from higher education so that they could take up professional employment somewhere else.

"I think I have to learn to somehow detach myself emotionally from this piece of land," pondered farmer Wilhelm Diekmann, whose farm has been in the family for the past 100 years. "I have to learn that I can also do something else. Perhaps we Germans must learn not to cling so much to the earth."

"I suppose that I have made peace with the fact that a title deed on my land is absolutely no guarantee against expropriation. I think that I have overcome the fear factor, and the threat of expropriation has no influence on my day to day activities," said farmer Reimer Thiessen. "You need an almost naive optimism. And last but not least, you have to know that a white farmer owning a farm in Africa will always be sitting on top of a volcano."

Other farmers were supported by a religious or philosophical outlook on life. Afrikaans speaking farmers, influenced by their Calvinistic religion, are taught not to cling too much to material things in life, including land, as Sakkie Coetzee explained:

"With our Calvinist upbringing, we Afrikaners make sure – or should make sure – that we do not get too much attached to material goods. The land belongs to God and we just manage it while we are here. You are the steward of the land and losing it one day should not mean the end of life."

But also farmers who are not part of any religious community have developed a philosophy of life which helps them to come to terms with possible land loss, as the following two statements illustrate:

“The farm has become our home, but we do not see ourselves as owners of this farm,” asserted farmer and artist Dörte Berner near Nina. “Even if you bought a piece of land, it never belongs to you; it is just a gift that you have to take care of. If you have a close relationship with land and it is one day taken away from you, then this gift must become something inside you, something that you will carry in your heart.”

Another German farmer, who had just bought and planted more than a thousand olive trees on his land, has adopted theologian Martin Luther’s famous statement of hope: ‘Even if I knew the world would end tomorrow, I would continue to plant my apple trees.’ Olive trees need seven or more years of growth, before they will bear fruit for the first time, and by planting them, the farmer refused to let fear and pessimism get the upper hand of his life.

These five different examples of farmers’ attitudes might not be representative, but they show their individual ways of dealing with insecurity.

Trust in the government

In spite of this uncertainty and instances of non-transparent land expropriation, a large number of Namibian farmers have kept a basic trust in the rule of law and of the government. Interestingly, farmers who were able to look beyond the end of their own nose – be it on account of extensive travelling, higher education or studies abroad – were often the most confident and trustful.

“I am a Namibian citizen and have a positive attitude towards my country, also emotionally,” said Markus Berner. “I have a basic trust in our government, at least no less than people in other countries in the world. I know other countries and can compare.”

Harry Schneider-Waterberg is extensively re-building and renovating on his farm. “I am investing and extending – this raises the value of the farm, and in case of expropriation I will be compensated accordingly. I have trust in the rule of law which I enjoy in this country, and I trust that the laws of land reform will be adhered to.”

There were also more cautious voices such as that of Jos van Zyl, an Afrikaans speaking farmer in the north. Contrary to western standards of good governance, van Zyl trusted the government as long as the ruling party was strong and had a large majority behind it. He was therefore cautious to unquestioningly welcome a strong opposition movement in Namibia, as this could force the ruling party to use land reform as a political tool:

“If you have a leader who is losing support, he will do anything to stay in power, and he might not hesitate to take farms away to do so.”

This view was echoed by a number of white farmers, who feared that Namibia’s young democracy would not necessarily be stabilized by a strong opposition. They would prefer a strong government, backed by a safe majority of Namibian voters, so that the government could develop the country without too many political challenges from inside.

Learning from the Zimbabwean experience

In Namibia, black and white alike are willing to learn from the Zimbabwean experience to keep the spectre of unpredictable violence at bay. Reimar von Hase is confident that white commercial farmers in Namibia are avoiding many of the mistakes that were made in Zimbabwe:

“Namibia is not Zimbabwe and things are being handled very differently here. The contact with the Namibian government is good, we can make proposals, they listen to us. I also have the feeling that the readiness to cooperate is growing.”

Most importantly, while white farmers in Zimbabwe had started to support political opposition movements, the Namibia Agricultural Union (NAU) keeps out of politics:

“In Zimbabwe the political activity of the white farmers has led to polarization and violence – and farmers in Namibia today avoid this by all means. This is something that we have definitely learned from Zimbabwe.”

Farmers feel that informing citizens in detail of what to expect, when a government programme directly affects their whole life, would take a big chunk of negative emotions out of the land reform process. But instead of entering the political arena to fight land reform, farmers have turned the tables and tried to contribute to its successful implementation.

The farmers’ union has, for example, proposed a model for expropriation criteria to the Ministry of Lands and Resettlement. The model applies a mathematical formula, combining factors such as utilization of land, productivity, absenteeism of owners etc. If these criteria were to become part of land reform policy and to be made public, farmers could work out the chances of being able to remain on their land, and prepare themselves mentally, emotionally and economically for expropriation.



*Reimar von Hase of the Namibia
Agricultural Union*

“We try to reach objectivity and to get away from arbitrary decisions,” said NAU president von Hase. The model was favourably received by the Ministry of Lands and Resettlement, and recommended as a helpful instrument for land reform procedures.

White farmers are not the only people whose lives are directly affected when commercial farms change ownership in one way or another. Clarity on expropriation measures would also help to alleviate the fears of the much larger group of people and their families who live and work on commercial farms as employees: the farm workers.

Although there is an active farm workers' union in Namibia, farm workers are less prominently represented than their employers, and their voices are rarely heard. What do they have to say about land reform? What are their emotions and sensitivities?

The fears of farm workers

Losers on all fronts

One group that is often mentioned as 'losing out' with land reform is that of black farm workers, who are employed on farms, mainly still owned by white farmers.

Most commercial farms in Namibia are huge (5,000 to 30,000 hectares), isolated and far away from the nearest village or town. Labourers who accept employment on a commercial farm are therefore obliged to live with their families on the owners' farm. In this situation they usually become completely dependent upon their employer for the provision of housing, water and fuel, as well as food and medical care.

As most farm workers are poor and do not have their own means of transport, they also rely on the farm owner for their children's transport to the nearest school, for transport to health clinics and hospitals, and for any personal visits to the nearest town or village. Because older farm workers are often uneducated and even illiterate, they also depend on the farmer to inform them about important issues such as labour legislation, elections, or health matters.

Today farm workers' rights are protected by labour laws, they have a right to a minimum wage and decent housing, but for many aspects of everyday life they are still at the mercy of their employer's goodwill. If they have a 'good boss' they are lucky, if they have a stingy or unfriendly one – bad luck!

At the same time, no farmer can survive without his or her farm workers. Farm workers help with herding, with repairing and maintaining water installations and the hundreds of kilometres of fencing around and within the farm, with planting and harvesting, and with the thousands of chores that crop up everyday on a farm, which is more or less a self-reliant small kingdom.

Many farm workers know the farm, its climate, its game and domestic animals, and every square metre of bush and rivers much better than the farm owners themselves, especially if they grew up on the farm or if their families have lived and worked there for generations.

Before independence, during the apartheid era, farm workers were rarely trusted with higher level responsibilities, not even with driving the farm owners' cars. During trips to town or cattle posts they were usually banished to the back of the vans, from where they had to jump down every now and then to open the numerous farm

gates. Today, an increasing number of farm workers have a drivers' licence and take on responsibilities in the growing tourist business on farms. They transport tourists to and from guest farms, and accompany trophy hunters on their hunting adventures. Many also work as cooks, waitresses or cleaning personnel.

Farm owners and farm workers therefore live in an almost symbiotic relationship on the same piece of land, dependent on each other, needing each other and sharing everyday problems, including the joys and troubles of farm life, illnesses, and catastrophes like storms, droughts and veldt fires.

Content with a life without alternatives

Just like their employers, most farm workers have a deep love for the farm on which they are staying, especially if they and their ancestors grew up on the farm and family graves have become part of the land. Just as with their white owners, these graves connect them spiritually with the farm and increase a sense of belonging and identity.

Farm workers also enjoy the peaceful rural lifestyle, living with nature and the relative safety from crime. "Living in this nature makes me content," said Hanna Kooper on a farm near Maltahöhe, and Lizette Beukes on the same farm finds it important that on a farm "I can see God's creation every day."

Lillian Beukes on farm Krumhuk, near Windhoek, also loves life on the farm because "it is not as busy and full of problems as in town, and I do not have to worry about being attacked by thugs! I feel safe here."

In spite of low wages and sometimes inferior housing conditions, most farm workers on white commercial farms seem to be content with their life and would like to stay on the farm where they are living and working. Wilhelm Odendaal, in a land reform study, confirms that most farm workers like the farms they are living on. "Even as poorly paid farm workers they have their basic needs met: they receive a regular salary, are allowed to have chickens, small stock and perhaps even cattle, and live in reasonably good housing."⁴⁴

Lillian Beukes confirmed this, when saying: "Here life is much cheaper than in town, we do not pay for water and for our house, and we can collect wood in the veldt and do not have to buy it."

⁴⁴ Harring, S.L. & W. Odendaal (2007). *No Resettlement Available*, Windhoek: Legal Assistance Centre, p. 27

Other farm workers love farm life, because they do not know much else; the farm is their beloved home, and many young men who grew up on a farm know its every hill and dale. Often their love overrides economic considerations, and is just as irrational as that of their white employers.

David Kheiseb, a young man in his early thirties, grew up on a farm in the south and was employed for many years as a driver, a hunting guide, and later as a farm foreman. He knew the farm like the back of his hand and never had the wish to live anywhere else. Six years ago the farm owner had to sell the farm. Kheiseb and his family, after receiving their severance pay according to labour regulations, had to leave their home with all their belongings.

The farmer's son helped Kheiseb to find a job on another farm, and for the past five years he has been working and living on a farm near Windhoek. He likes his work, his employers pay him well and treat him with kindness and respect. He has a large house, water and electricity, a television set, and is allowed to use the farmers' car.

But when talking about his home, he expressed his deep longing for the place where he came from and for his wish to return there one day:

"When I came to this farm, the thoughts and feelings about my old farm never left me, they were there day and night. When I talked, I just talked about it, my thoughts always walked in that direction. Here I have a good life. I have good work, but my home is down south. That is where I belong, and I want to go back one day."⁴⁵

All farm workers interviewed were aware of the possibility of farm expropriations. They had either heard about it over the radio, from other farm workers or were informed by their white employers.

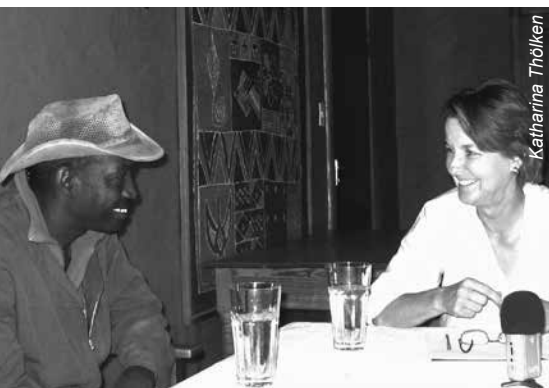


Farm worker David Kheiseb and his three children

⁴⁵ See Interview 18: David Kheiseb

When asked about their feelings, they had obviously thought about the possible loss of work and livelihood. Just like their employers, some are trying to keep fears at bay and remain positive about their future; they trust that their employer would assist them with finding a new job or even hope that the government would provide them with a piece of land.

David Kheiseb was assured that his employers would not leave him in the lurch: “My farmers said if the government takes away their farm, they will fight for us farm workers so that we can stay on the land.”



Farm worker Linus Haikali on farm Krumhuk

Linus Haikali on farm Krumhuk, near Windhoek, trusted that the government would give him a piece of land if he needed it: “I trust in the government that they will give us a piece of land, because government takes away the land so that it can give the land to us.”

Both men were also considering alternatives. Linus Haikali, who originally comes from the north, said:

“If I ever have to leave this place, I would go back to Ovamboland.” David Kheiseb also had an alternative place to go: “I will go to my father’s farm in the south and help him there.”

A fear with a difference

Emotions and fears around farm expropriations thus partly depend on the social network that farm workers have outside the farm of their employment – be it family ties in the communal areas or relatives on other farms.

However, many farm workers do not have these networks, especially if they have lived on the same farm for a long time. For them the fear of losing home and livelihood is also a sword of Damocles hanging over their heads.

But it is a fear with a difference.

First, in contrast to farm owners, farm workers are not compensated for the loss of home and livelihood when a commercial farm is expropriated or sold. Although they have the right to severance payment according to Namibia's labour regulations, they and their families, as well as their livestock, will in most cases simply have to leave the farm sooner or later, depending on negotiations between old and new farm owners and on their goodwill or generosity. The new farm owner or the government has no obligation to take them on as employees, or allow their continued residence on the farm.

Second, the fear of losing home and livelihood is nothing new for farm workers in Namibia, and is not something which only came with post-independence land reform and possible expropriation. It began, when Europeans arrived in Namibia, changed large parts of the land into private property that can be bought, sold and owned by individuals, and used indigenous people as farm workers without giving them any right of tenure and residence on the farm.

Although, since independence, farm workers have enjoyed the protection of unions with respect to minimum wages, decent housing and service contracts, their situation has in principle remained the same: the employer owns the farm and its means of production, the farm workers earn a salary, and sometimes even a share in the profits – often they are also allowed to keep a number of sheep or cattle on the farm – but they have no rights to the land, no matter how long they or their families have stayed on it.

During the course of the past century farm workers have managed to somehow survive the ups and downs of their existence, but no studies exist on what has happened to them during the numerous changes of land ownership. Were they sold more or less with the farm to the new owners as part of the farm's assets? Were they chased off the farm with a payout cheque which would provide them with cash and livelihood for a few months, but not with a new life?

Farm workers and land reform

There is also not much evidence of what has happened to the farm workers more recently, when farms changed ownership through the current land reform process. What happened to the farm workers and their families who had lived and worked on the more than 200 farms that were bought by government from white farmers for resettlement purposes? And what happened to those who resided on the more than 700 farms that were bought by black farmers from white farmers through the Affirmative Action Loan Scheme or privately?

“In the absence of any reliable data, it must be assumed that the majority of workers on farms bought by the state for redistribution had to leave. This implied a loss of employment without compensation,” wrote land reform consultant Wolfgang Werner.⁴⁶

Strangely, government land reform policies have rarely taken the specific situation of farm workers into account. Seeing that farm workers are already living on the land and that they are poor and vulnerable, it would be logical to target them as beneficiaries of the government’s land redistribution programme, instead of depriving them of employment.

In the first Resettlement Policy of 1997 farm workers were indeed still listed as one of the main target groups, who should get preference when applications for resettlement on government farms were considered. However, in the revised National Resettlement Policy of 2001, farm workers have to apply on the same basis as any other ‘formerly disadvantaged’ person in Namibia.

Farm workers are therefore often described as the real losers of land reform. And indeed it does not make much sense if land reform, aimed at providing poor and landless people with land and livelihood, happens at the cost of people who are exactly that: poor and landless, and who will lose both a home and a job in the process.



Katharina Tholken

Most farm workers have no other skills besides farming and do not have the social skills needed to adapt to city life. When farm workers were dismissed or retrenched, they and their families often had no other choice than to move to the squatter camps of nearby villages, where the young people did not find work and landed on the streets, and the old people soon died, because they felt like an uprooted old tree. No law, no policy, no union protected them from this fate – neither before nor after independence.

Farm workers in the south of Namibia

⁴⁶ Werner, Wolfgang and B. Kruger (2007). *Livelihoods after Land Reform*, Namibia Country Paper, p. 18

“We were chased off the land like dogs by the new farm owner,” a farm employee told me, full of bitterness. “And this happened ten years after independence. My great grandfather died in the war against the Germans, and my father fought for independence – but we are still chased away from the land.”

It is therefore no wonder that farm workers, when asked how they felt about the possible expropriation of their white employers, did not see it as a particularly new threat. Insecurity has been part of farm workers’ life for more than 100 years.

The sensitive topic of nepotism

Farm workers, however, mentioned one new worry which is rarely discussed publicly, as it touches the sensitive issue of nepotism and corruption.

With land reform, hundreds of commercial farms changed from white into black hands and many farm workers became employed by black farm owners, a change not necessarily regarded as a change for the better. Farm worker Selma Tiboth⁴⁷ explained this as follows:

“There is a difference between when a black farmer has a farm or a white farmer has a farm – these are two different things. If a black farmer gets a farm, he employs people to look after the sheep, but he himself sits in Windhoek and often his workers get very little money.”⁴⁸

Low wages are often the consequence of the new farm owner’s own poverty, and Tiboth understands their situation. But poverty is not always the reason:

“Okay, some black farmers do not have enough money to pay their workers well and that is a problem for farm workers. But even if the black farmers have enough money – you can see that because they have big cars – they do not pay their workers well. That is what people say.”

Receiving low and irregular wages is of course nothing new, and farm workers have lived with very low wages on white farms for decades. However, since independence, farm workers at least enjoyed some form of protection by newly established labour and farm workers’ unions. They were supported in cases of labour disputes with their white employers, or when minimum wages were not paid and no decent housing was provided.

⁴⁷ Name changed

⁴⁸ See Interview 19: Selma Tiboth

This union support is, according to farm workers, not forthcoming, when the farm owner is black, and in particular when he or she has political connections and influence, as Tiboth explained indignantly, insisting that I should write about this situation in my reports:

“The difference is: when a white man treats his black farm workers badly, there is the union which will help the workers. But when a black farmer with a big farm and many cars treats his workers badly, and gives little money to the people who look after his sheep, then this rich black man will not be taken to court by the union.”

Now that more and more black farmers are taking over commercial farms and becoming employers, farm workers feel that the unions are failing them:

“I hear from other people and over the radio that the unions do not go against black farm owners. And I feel sorry for farm workers, who work for black owners, because they have even less rights than those working on white farms.”

A labour union consultant⁴⁹ confirmed that farm workers are again losing out:

“Especially well off farmers, who allegedly have strong connections to the ruling party or local government are not being touched. Farm workers definitely seem to be losers on all fronts.”

⁴⁹ The consultant asked to remain anonymous.

Moving beyond the black and white divide

Understanding and healing

After a century of racism and apartheid there is naturally continued mistrust between black and white on both sides. Black people feel that whites are not only unwilling to share land, but use all kind of tricks to keep white land in white hands. On the other hand, white people often feel that they are used as scapegoats for the government's political or economic failures, and that their efforts to contribute to the economy of the country are not appreciated. Sometimes the mistrust is justified, sometimes it is merely a perception; most of the time it is a mixture of both.

Whites, for example, are often accused of unwillingness to sell their land to black farmers because of racism. While this might be true in some cases, most farmers simply keep their farms for economic and emotional reasons. On the other hand, when white farmers' organizations do make an effort to make more land available to the government, suspicions that these are not genuine efforts immediately arise.

"They are just defending their interests," said Prime Minister Angula, and Namibian Farm Workers Union representative Alfred Angula also remained cautious: "It might also be used as a window dressing activity."

This mistrust is of course not pure invention, but is based on experience - not only in the past, but also in the present – and could well be a reaction to the strong and often unveiled resentment of some white farmers to land reform ventures. By making sweeping statements about 'we' and 'they', or 'blacks' and 'Africa' in general, they uphold racial thinking patterns and reinforce division and suspicion:

- "And in the end we have a situation like in Zimbabwe. People don't produce anymore and everything goes down the drain. The land gets impoverished, and then we have the end result as everywhere in Africa."
- "What actually do they want to do with the land? We want to keep the economy going, and they just want their families to be happy."
- "Black Africans are unproductive and do not know much about farming. They are basically lazy."

Unfortunately these farmers are not aware of the hurt they are inflicting and the damage they are causing to their black fellow Namibians, their own farming community and to the country as a whole. While an increasing number of white farmers and their unions are trying to improve human relationships between black and white, insensitive, racial and ignorant statements by other farmers often cancel out these efforts.

Exactly the same feelings

In spite of continued racism on the side of some white farmers, I found an amazing and unexpected amount of understanding of black Namibians for their white compatriots' feelings. Possibly my own whiteness had to do with this and people were polite and accommodating. On the other hand, the depth of their understanding went beyond friendly acknowledgement. It rather seemed to me a genuine expression of the African spirit of ubuntu. Ubuntu enables people to feel the others person's pain, because the basic feeling of existence is 'I am a person through you', and the other way round.

Whenever I broached the subject of white fears and uncertainties with black Namibians, the reaction was surprising. Instead of indifference I encountered understanding, and instead of the wish for retaliation, I usually encountered the wish to find solutions.

Ministers and agricultural officials, for example, readily acknowledged the importance of addressing white farmers' fears of expropriation. Prime Minister Nahas Angula did not hesitate to admit that "nobody wants to live in uncertainty; nobody wants to be in a situation where you don't know how to behave in a politically correct way. The government needs to do something about that, to set some kind of criteria."⁵⁰

Mr. Vehaka Tjimune of the Namibian National Farmers Union, representing mainly black communal farmers, imagined himself in the situation of a white farmer:

"If I was a white commercial farmer today (and) looking at the concept of land reform, the very first thing that comes to me is the level of uncertainty. I do not know whether my farm is the next to be expropriated, I do not know whether I should go to Agribank and take out a loan for say an investment period of ten years."

⁵⁰ See Interview 1: Prime Minister Nahas Angula

Referring to the Odendaal Plan in the 1960's, which was also a government expropriation process, Tjimune stressed the importance of clear plans and objectives:

“Expropriation has happened in this country before; the Odendaal Plan was an expropriation plan. I am not saying its aims (consolidating South Africa’s ethnically based homeland policy) were correct, but at least there was a plan on the table with clear objectives which the government could sell to the land owners.”⁵¹

Also Bishop Kameeta of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in the Republic of Namibia (ELCRN) showed deep sympathy for the situation of white farmers, because feelings of loss, frustration and fear have been only too familiar to black Namibians themselves.

“I personally have a problem with confiscating farms. It is part of our constitution and can be done ... but when we confiscate land, let us take into consideration the feelings of the people. They are citizens of this country and have exactly the same feeling as we would have.”

He agreed that white people, who have been living in Namibia for generations, also have become attached to the land, despite the fact that their forefathers conquered it through violence and force.

“They have been living on that land. They buried their beloved ones on that land and they know that those graves will not be taken care of when other people will settle there.”

Kameeta talked about the day when he discovered a photo in the newspaper, showing Mrs. Wiese, the expropriated farmer of Ongombo West, at the grave of her grandfather. “She was sitting there before she had to leave the farm. The pain that this woman was feeling moved me so much, because it is exactly the same pain that Africans felt about the loss of their land.”



*Vehaka Tjimune of the Namibian
National Farmers Union*

⁵¹ See Interview 5: Vehaka Tjimune

Kameeta admitted that expropriation needs to be treated more sensitively, if white farmers are to continue to feel fully included as Namibian citizens:

“Expropriation as it is done at present does not create an atmosphere in which all people are feeling part of this country. When we confiscate land, let us take into consideration the feelings of the people.”⁵²

And the other way round?

While acknowledging the fears and emotions of his “white brothers and sisters”, Kameeta regrets that often too little understanding for the emotions of black Namibians is forthcoming from white farmers and that “many white farmers don’t realize that black people felt the same, when their land was taken from them.”

Today’s white farmers cannot be blamed for what happened a hundred years ago, even if they are still benefiting from colonial land occupation, the Bishop explained. But the fact that many whites still deny or even defend colonial land grabs by their forefathers stands in the way of mutual trust and acceptance:

“They do not have to reject the people whose name they are carrying. They do not have to hate or despise their ancestors. But maybe they could just have the courage to say: what happened in the past was not right. Our parents did bad things and as their children we recognize this and will try to improve on it.”

And indeed, on the side of white farmers I did not always find this amazing generosity of spirit and understanding for their black fellow citizens. People were quick to criticize and dismiss land reform as a failure. White farmers often focused on their own insecurities of expropriation as well as on the failures of resettlement that they had heard or read about, even if they had never visited a resettlement farm themselves.

They also often summarily accused government officials of corruption and nepotism and the new farmers as incompetent:

- “The resettlement farms are a catastrophe. The resettled people do not know anything about farming. The farms are far too small. There are water problems, and they do not take responsibility.”
- “The whole land reform thing is only to provide government ministers with farms, it only serves their own greed.”

⁵² See Interview 10: Bishop Zephania Kameeta

Acknowledgement and gratitude

But while a number of white farmers are still blatantly refusing to step beyond the black and white divide, many more have begun to stretch out their hands for better understanding and cooperation.

A young white farmer in the south, who had just taken over a rather run-down farm a few months earlier – with substantial financial backing from his family – showed not only understanding, but also took off his hat to the struggling resettlement farmers in his neighbourhood:

“Based on my experiences of the past few months, I cannot imagine taking over such a resettlement farm myself without the financial backing that I have. Without this backup my farm would not look much different to what these resettlement farms allegedly look like. That these farmers suffer and have difficulties with farming I can understand very well. “

Also Reimer Thiessen, a more established farmer in central Namibia, acknowledges that there are wounds that need to be healed:

“I think we still need to heal the wounds of the past and land reform should be seen as a contribution to nation building.”⁵³

More and more German speaking Namibians have accepted the past and are trying to acknowledge and understand. For example, in August 2004, at the occasion of the commemoration of the colonial wars, Raimar von Hase, who a year later was elected president of the Namibia Agricultural Union (representing the majority of white farmers), publicly acknowledged the pain and suffering caused by German soldiers to the Ovaherero and Nama people a hundred years ago.

“As a German speaking Namibian and farmer,” he acknowledged that thousands of Namibians died through the bullets of the guns of the German Schutztruppe and



Farmer Reimer Thiessen

⁵³ See Interview 27 : Reimer Thiessen

that those who survived the war were robbed of their land, their cattle and thus not only of their basis of living but also of their culture:

“To know this and to acknowledge this without any justifications is painful and causes sorrow and shame.”

But he also turned to the present and expressed his gratitude for peace and stability in post-apartheid Namibia:

“Another emotion of this day is gratitude and pride. In spite of the pain and the mourning we also have reason to be thankful, because today we live and work together in freedom and peace as fellow Namibians. We are thankful that we are steadily developing into one nation, in which the different cultures are living side by side and are all part and parcel of our beloved country.”

Who is healing the wounds?

In Namibia it is generally acknowledged that loss of land indeed caused deep emotional and spiritual wounds, and that addressing past injuries and injustices is an important aim of land reform. In particular, church leaders like to speak of the important symbolic meaning of land reform, as Bishop Kameeta clearly stated:

“The violation of our land rights meant the violation of the souls of our people. But restitution of our land rights means the resurrection of the soul of our nation.”

Bishop Hertel of the German Lutheran Church in Namibia agreed:

“Land reform also has a spiritual aspect, because it could contribute to reconciliation between the different population groups and heal the wounds of the past.”

In the face of this general acknowledgement of past wounds and the need for healing, it should be clearly stated that the actual land reform process does not take the healing aspect into consideration at all.

Land reform, as it is conceptualized and implemented in Namibia, is a process without any spiritual framework. In no way does it take into account emotions, wounds or the elevation of human dignity. It is taking place at a merely technical and administrative level: the criteria for land distribution are technical, government support (if at all) is technical, and there is no cooperation with churches or other organizations responsible for ‘healing’.

Land is redistributed to black Namibians according to criteria that have nothing to do with past wounds. Anyone can apply for resettlement in any part of Namibia, and former land loss or family histories are not taken into account. Affirmative Action loans for farm purchases by black farmers are based purely on financial status. And while resettlement criteria are theoretically take into account some social factors, in practice they are often influenced by political affiliations and influence.

Prof. Cheryl Walker, professor for Sociology at the University of Stellenbosch, reported that in South Africa people expressly regretted that land reform only happened at a technical level, and that they missed accompanying healing exercises:

“With respect to their emotional needs, people wanted acknowledgement and healing and the sense of redress was very strong. But unfortunately the administrative process did not allow room for symbolic reclaim. It remained very technical, while it could have been more of a healing exercise. People really wanted that.”

Also in Namibia, though the importance of land reform for healing is often mentioned, no processes for healing have been developed by government, and even the churches are not doing much more than appealing for understanding, sensitivity and cooperation.

In 2004, for example, the Council of Churches in Namibia (CCN) appealed both to government and to white farmers to let the land reform process be guided “by the spirit of social justice, peace and the fear of God, who is the sole owner of the land.”

The churches also called on farmers and government to take the moral and emotional aspects of land reform into consideration, especially with respect to farm workers and the poor, and called on the government for transparency when planning to expropriate farms: “If this is not done, fears and uncertainties will grow, not only of the farm owners, but also of the farm workers, about their future.”⁵⁴

However, beyond appeals and talks with farmers, no concrete action is taking place on the part of churches and religious leaders.

⁵⁴ Press Release of the National Committee of Lutheran Churches in Namibia, 25 May 2004, issued by the four bishops of the Lutheran Churches: former SWAPO politician Bishop Zephania Kameeta, Bishop Reinhard Keding, Bishop J. Sindano and Bishop Thomas Shivute

Healing at the grassroots

But in Namibia some healing is taking place – not through words and not through healing exercises, but through actions. And it is happening neither at church nor at government level, but where farming takes place in practice: at the grassroots.



An 'old' and a 'new' farmer in conversation

In Namibia, black and white farmers have rolled up their sleeves and started farmers' initiatives such as in Uhlenhorst, Outjo and Grootfontein, where 'new' (black) and 'old' (white) farmers support each other as neighbours, learn from each other and organize training sessions and informative meetings.

For example, the Uhlenhorst Farmers' Association regularly invites new resettlement or affirmative action farmers in their area to explanations or demonstrations of local farming methods, which often differ from those

they were used to in the communal areas. On some days animal diseases are dealt with, on others wind engines, cattle breeding methods, or finances and management.

Other local farmers' associations and organizations have followed this example and are favourably received. Experience shows that wherever black and white farmers work together as colleagues and neighbours, a new kind of trust develops, built on common interests instead of political differences.

More and more farmers are moving beyond the black-white divide, as expressed by Reinhold Schreiber, a young farmer in the Uhlenhorst district:

"I don't care if I have a black or a white neighbour. What is important to me is whether I can rely on my neighbour as a co-farmer, for instance, if problematic wild animals have to be dealt with, or in the case of a fire, or if tools don't function. We depend on mutual assistance out here in the countryside."⁵⁵

⁵⁵ Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit (GTZ): *Land Reform in Namibia, Perspectives and Opinions*, 2006

Mr. Solomon Tjipura, Chairman of the Namibia Emerging Commercial Farmers' Forum (NECFF) agreed: "Basically farming knows no colour. We all speak one language - and that is farming!"⁵⁶

Of course these new initiatives will not be able to heal wounds that are more than a hundred years old. And they are local and not national ventures. But they are a beginning – and they have even become an example to neighbouring countries.

When South Africa's 'Female Emerging Farmer of the Year' 2006, Olga Nghatsane, visited Namibia in 2007, she was impressed with the amicable and successful cooperation between black and white farmers:

"They're so open to each other, they help each other, and I wish that could take place in South Africa as well."⁵⁷

Today the 'Emerging Commercial Farmers Support Programme' under the Joint Presidency Committee of the two agricultural unions in Namibia continues to provide new farmers with training courses, information through talks and presentations, and mentorship programmes.

These are extremely important measures because they are achieving what neither the government nor the churches have managed to address: helping to heal the wounds of the past in their own practical and down-to-earth way.

⁵⁶ See Interview 7: Solomon Tjipura

⁵⁷ Deutsche Presse-Agentur (dpa): Namibian land reforms gain attention in southern Africa. Submitted by Tarique Anwar, 27 May 2007

Why do people really want land?

Apparent and hidden motivations

Because of past wounds and because of present fears, because the liberation struggle was fought about land and because ancestral land is still not returned - these and more were the answers I received when asking people why land was such an emotional issue. Some emotions were shared by all Namibians, some only by black and some only by white people, and some only by certain ethnic groups.

Talking about all these emotions was helpful to understand the different ways in which land reform evoked feelings of hurt, hope or fear, and how these feelings provoked visions for the future or obsessions with the past, how they led to action or passivity, and how they supported or obstructed the process of land reform.

It became obvious that land was seen first and foremost as emotional because of violent land disposessions in the past. These wounds were still strongly present in people's memory, in particular of the Ovaherero, Nama and Damara people, who had lost most of their land to white settlers. Emotions around these wounds have been passed on from generation to generation and have created rather vague expectations that after independence land reform could somehow address or heal them. For some people 'healing the wounds' meant the return of ancestral land and with that the reconstruction of the past. For others 'addressing the wounds' simply meant a piece of land and therewith a chance in life that was formerly denied to black Namibians.

These expectations, reinforced during the long years of the liberation struggle, are still present today, even though it has become evident that the government cannot and will not fulfil them. First of all, there is simply not enough land available for everyone to receive a piece of the land cake; second, after the first land reform conference in 1991, the government made the very clear decision to draw a line under the past and not to take claims to ancestral land into consideration.

In spite of these clear-cut policies, hopes for the return of land have been promoted by some political or ethnic groups and have often become ideological and political tools. Emotions around land loss are used to keep the past alive, to strengthen

ethnic and group identities, to uphold ethnic power bases of politicians and chiefs, or to underpin demands for reparations from former colonial governments.

The focus on land reform has also highlighted the insecure position of farm workers, now and in the past, and the fact that the instruments of land reform do not bring much hope into their lives. They might even create more insecurity because new black farmers are often too poor or even unwilling to pay farm workers decent wages, and labour laws are allegedly not as strictly applied to new black farmers as to white farmers.

The feelings of uncertainty of white farm owners around land expropriation have lead to passivity and lack of investment and agricultural activity on their farms. On the other hand, when the government has offered gestures of understanding and cooperation, they have lead to the opposite: commitment to the development of farming and neighbourhood support for new farmers.

On this basis, wherever black and white farmers were focusing on their common interests as farmers and neighbours, they were able to break down the wall of fear, mistrust and hurt between them and see common ground.

The traditional meaning of land

Interviews and discussions confirmed that emotions, much more than an objective interest in farming and agriculture, are strongly influencing general attitudes towards land reform and that most of these emotions are rooted in the past. But knowing and understanding these attitudes was only the first part of my journey through the jungle of emotions around land reform. The next step was to investigate which concrete expectations people had when they applied for land within the framework of land reform.

According to figures provided by the Ministry of Lands and Resettlement, more than 200,000 black Namibians have applied for resettlement on a farm. Nobody is sure where this figure comes from and whether it is correct. But fact is that thousands of Namibians are waiting for the day when they can say: I have a farm, be it large or small.

Of course the natural assumption is that when people want land, they would like to become farmers, and land reform policies and procedures build on this assumption.

But is this obvious motivation really predominant? Or are there other more hidden expectations associated with land?

One reply I received from almost all black Namibians, when asking what land really meant to them, was: 'Land is livelihood!'

When President Hifikepunye Pohamba left the Ministry of Lands and Resettlement in 2005 to become the head of state and bade farewell to his colleagues, he said:

"There is nothing one can do without land ... the land is the main source of livelihood ... and this Ministry is the most important Ministry."⁵⁸

These words were like a template for all other replies to my questions. Prime Minister Nahas Angula answered without hesitation that land was an emotional issue, "because land is a source of livelihood" and Minister Wilhelm Konjore simply said: "Land is the livelihood of everybody."

Even most university students whom I interviewed echoed this view with more or less the same words as their ministers and elders, both in written statements and during discussions:

"For a Namibian person to have land is to be alive."

"Land is livelihood."

"Everything depends on land, cattle, crop production – land is livelihood."

"Land gives people security and livelihood."

Among white commercial farmers I did not encounter this view, but rather the opposite. They enjoy farming and they love their land, but the average farmer is convinced that the same amount of investment and hard work would have been financially more rewarding in other economic sectors. Farming is seen as a risky rather than a secure way of earning one's livelihood.

"From a financial point of view, farming is definitely not a lucrative business," explained farmer Reimer Thiessen. "To be able to live on a farm, you need to accept that farming does not really give you permanent financial security."

⁵⁸ 'The Land', March 2005, Ministry of Lands and Resettlement, Volume 09, Issue 01

Most white farmers were also reluctant to advise their children to take up farming, as it was a business dependent on the whims of nature and uncontrollable economic factors, without a guarantee of a secure and stable income. Most white farmer parents ensure that their children receive a high quality education, so that they have an alternative to taking over their parents' farm one day.

From my own experience with farming I also found the spontaneous reply that 'land is livelihood' puzzling, especially when it was expressed by young people. None of the students interviewed intended to become farmers. When presented with the theoretical choice of either accepting a good job in town or a piece of land, they all preferred employment in town. And yet, for most of them, land somehow represented safety, security and livelihood.

"Where does this conviction by black Africans that 'land is livelihood' come from?" I asked Mr. Solomon Tjipura, president of the Emerging Farmers Union.



*Solomon Tjipura of
the Namibia Emerging
Commercial Farmers' Union*

He explained that this idea has deep roots in traditional ways of life and farming. Today, young people have alternatives, but traditionally, in most African countries land was the only means of income, the only way of providing food for the family, the only way of making a living. Life without land was inconceivable, while having land was a guarantee of a secure life:

"Historically black people derived their livelihood from land ... for the older generation land was the prime source of income, it was the basis of their livelihood."

This notion has been true for centuries for traditional communal farmers, in particular for the more settled crop producing communities in north Namibia, who form the majority of the Namibian population. People needed land so that they could plant, harvest and eat – and the more land they had the more they had to eat.

More land also meant the possibility to sell agricultural products so that wealth could be accumulated beyond mere daily subsistence. "That is what you find with

traditional people,” farmer Andreas Amushila explained. “For the Ovambos it is ‘cattle and corn’ – as long as you have lots of that, you are a rich person.”

Not money, but ‘land and hard work’ was what was needed to survive economically and to live a secure life, explained Namibian author Neshani Andreas⁵⁹:

“We Ovambos grew up with the attitude that you must work on the land if you want to eat; also with selling things from the land, all the year round, selling and bartering because there were always things that you harvested and that could be sold or bartered. It’s in our system.”

New economy, old emotions

This attitude remained ‘in the system’ even long after people had started to move to the urban areas to earn an income from other activities, according to Andreas:

“Even, when people started to move into cities, they still had to regularly return to their homesteads in the north, to their ‘epya’, and help on the land. This sometimes became a burden, but the land was still the place where life came from.”

It is not unusual that in a society, culturally constructed emotions do not change as fast as life itself. What is significant is that this construct, based on traditional communal farming, is transported into the present land reform process, which is based on a completely different concept of land, namely land that is individually owned and used within a modern market-based economy. And with it are transported all those emotions and expectations traditionally associated with land: that it provides livelihood and even wealth.

Affirmative action farmer Mr. Salomon Tjipura confirmed this when he said: “The main reason in my view is that in the past, black people derived their livelihood from land, and that there is still a very general perception that land ownership will make you rich.”

How do present-day land reform and this traditionally underpinned longing for ‘land as livelihood’ go together?

After 18 years of experience with commercial farming, government as well as black farmers are beginning to see that this expectation can only be disappointed.

⁵⁹ Neshani Andreas is the author of *The Purple Violet of Oshaantu*, Heinemann Publishers (2001)

Even though politicians may themselves still be influenced by traditional views of land, they have realized that traditional farming on communal land on the one hand, and modern-day farming on commercial land on the other hand, are worlds apart, and that they need to radically change their views on what land reform should and could achieve.

‘Owning a farm can be a nightmare!’

This changed view of land became evident when, during the course of the discussions, emotions were put aside and practical experiences with respect to land, farming and commercial land reform were put onto the table. Once this happened, the idea that ‘land means livelihood’ was often replaced by the opposite: ‘owning a farm can be a nightmare!’

But it needed time and first-hand experience for both the government and new black farmers to realize that traditional farming and commercial farming were not simply two sides of the same coin.

After independence both the new government and individual black farmers entered the area of commercial farming, which was until then exclusively owned, managed and controlled by a white government, by white farmers and by white agricultural organizations. The changes that farmers face, when moving from the communal to the commercial farming sector, are enormous:

Most black farmers, originally from the relatively fertile communal areas in the north with good average rainfall, bought or received portions of commercial farms in the much drier central or southern part of the country. The geographical change forced them to change and limit their agricultural activities. While in the north they planted crops, vegetables and fruit, kept cattle and goats and also weaved baskets or made clay or wooden pots from local material etc., in the commercial areas stock farming is usually the only suitable agricultural activity. Planting is often not possible because of the dry climate and unsuitable soil, and material for handicraft is not available nearby.

Furthermore, they entered a completely different social environment, often hundreds of miles from their original home. Commercial farms are large, relatively isolated, and the nearest neighbours stay several kilometres away or do not live permanently on their farms. New and different social networks and neighbourhood relations had to be created – often with white farmers, who are much more experienced in the commercial sector, or with black farmers who came from different cultural or family backgrounds and spoke different languages.

Commercial farming is also drawing 'emerging' black farmers into a completely different economic system. While in the communal areas some forms of traditional bartering and exchange were still practised, new farmers had to get used to the modern-day cash economy and banking systems.

"You cannot go with cattle to town to buy things. What you need is money," explained new commercial farmer Andreas Amushila. "The old traditions will not be able to survive in a modern cash economy, they will die out."

Also, while in the communal areas farmers were assigned land by their traditional authority, in the commercial sector they have to buy their farm at market prices. This requires large amounts of cash, even when prospective farmers qualified for state bank loans. For the first years or even decades of farming loan repayments and the need to earn enough money for repairs, maintenance, salaries and their own livelihood would be a long-term burden to carry.

For resettlement farmers the situation is slightly different, as they do not have to buy their farms, but rather receive a portion of a former white commercial farm from the government. But to be successful in a commercial environment and to keep the farm economically productive, resettlement farmers also need capital to buy animals, for repairs and maintenance, and for transport, electricity, diesel etc. When they do not succeed in generating enough capital or when farming becomes difficult due to drought, resettlement farmers often struggle and sometimes end up bankrupt.

Andreas Amushila summed up the basic dilemma of farmers who arrive from the communal areas, where it was enough to have seeds, some implements and the will to work hard, to the commercial areas, where you need money in order to make money:

"Farming is something good, but you need a lot of money in order to be a productive farmer. Farming is not only about having land, you also need animals and capital."⁶⁰

Salomon Tjipura even went as far as saying: "Farming in general is financially not so rewarding, it is not really an incentive. Some young people even tell us that today you have to be either very rich or very stupid to go farming."⁶¹

Edward van Zyl, a white business man and part-time commercial farmer near Grootfontein, has observed that many new (black) commercial farmers who used to

⁶⁰ See Interview 12: Andreas Amushila

⁶¹ See interview 7: Solomon Tjipura



Businessman and farmer Edward van Zyl

farm in the communal area do not cope because of the high expenses involved:

“Quite a number of affirmative action farmers told me that buying their own farm through the government loan scheme was a waste of time. It made them poorer instead of richer, and they would rather go back to the reserves. Some have already rented their land back to white farmers to get some income, so that they can pay back the interest on their loans.”

Farmers need additional income to pay off their debts and therefore often keep a job in town. Studies have revealed that the majority of new farmers do not regard farming as their main occupation and that new farmers, who only farm part-time, stood the best chance to make regular payments to the bank.

Instead of providing a livelihood, land has often become a financial burden – and the dream of having ‘land for livelihood’ is shattered by the reality of the modern capitalist market economy.

How do government and farmers’ organizations deal with this reality?

From the political to the economic

The increasing awareness of the difference between traditional and commercial farming has led to a decisive change in thinking and dealing with land reform, as well as to changed emotions and expectations around the return of white-owned land into black hands.

Everybody unanimously agreed that land in the commercial area was by no means a sure way to secure a livelihood, but rather a huge challenge.

Government ministers admitted that land reform has not always taken account of the significant difference between the commercial and communal farming sectors. It has ignored that in a capitalist economy you need land and capital, and that the poor have little chance to survive in a commercial environment unless they are supported by the government.

Prime Minister Nahas Angula, who at the beginning of our interview asserted that “in the first place land is a source of livelihood” said, not much later during the same interview:

“A commercial farmer will tell you, if he is honest enough, that you cannot make a living from farming alone, unless you have two farms and if you were lucky enough to inherit these farms so that you owe nothing to the bank. Otherwise you need an extra job.”⁶²

Dr. Nickey Iyambo, at that time still Agriculture Minister, was even more radical:

“One problem is that people believe that getting land will make them rich. If they see a fenced off farm, they don’t see anything else but wealth. But in Namibia, having land and farming does not mean you are rich, never! Having a farm actually means that you might have debts up to your neck. As a minister responsible for agriculture I know that owning a farm can be a nightmare!”⁶³

What was surprising during interviews was the honesty with which government ministers as well as representatives of black farmers’ organisations admitted the shortcomings and conceptual mistakes of the land reform policies. They all strongly criticized their own programmes and approaches, and were obviously in a state of revisiting and reconsidering their concepts, even if no official statements had been made to date.

For many years one of the most important aims of land reform in Namibia was to address the rampant poverty among Namibian rural people by providing them with land, and with it – so it was assumed – a better life in formerly white owned commercial areas. But in 2001 Wolfgang Werner⁶⁴ had already noted:

“Some unpalatable facts will have to be faced in any deliberations on sustainable land reform in an arid environment such as ours. Many a myth held about the wonders of land ownership are likely to be shattered in the process. The simple

⁶² See Interview 1: Prime Minister Nahas Angula

⁶³ See Interview 2: Minister Dr. Nickey Iyambo

⁶⁴ Werner, Wolfgang (20012). ‘*The Land Question in Namibia*’, in Diener, I. & O. Graefe (eds.), *Contemporary Namibia: The First land marks of a Post-Apartheid Society*. Windhoek: Gamsberg Macmillan Publishers.



Minister Dr. Nickey Iyambo

truth is that land is not a panacea for our development problems. Its contribution towards long term poverty alleviation will be rather limited.”

The myth of the wonders of land ownership has definitely been shattered for most politicians and representatives of agricultural organizations. Compared to public statements in the years after independence, a clear change in thought patterns, interpretations and objectives of land reform has taken place.

“We should know that we are not going to solve our poverty problems through land reform,” Prime Minister Nahas Angula stated, and Minister Willem Konjore suggested moving away from the idea of targeting the poorest of the poor for resettlement and instead concentrating on middle class farmers to improve the success of the resettlement process:

“The stronger communal farmers qualify for the Affirmative Action Loan Scheme, and the middle class farmers should be targeted for resettlement.”



Minister Willem Konjore

It seems that a clear shift from political to economic objectives for land reform is taking place. Land is no longer to be used to resettle as many black people as possible on formerly white farms, but rather to contribute to the growth of the economy of the country as a whole, explained Vehaka Tjimune as representative of black communal farmers:

“The land reform progress should not be judged by the number of beneficiaries and the numbers of farms bought, but by its economic and social impact. Even if you have taken all the land from the white commercial farmers and redistributed it to the previously disadvantaged, the reality at the end of the day is that we will have the land but will not gain economically from it.”⁶⁵

This new approach goes hand in hand with a shift in thinking about the speed of land reform. In public statements so far, the slow pace of land reform has always been criticized – often blaming white farmers for their unwillingness to sell their farms to the government. However, it was clearly expressed that accelerating the land reform process was not desirable any longer.

⁶⁵ See Interview 5: Vehaka Tjimune

“We know that moving faster with land redistribution will not increase agricultural production,” said Minister Dr. Nickey Iyambo and Vehaka Tjimune also explained that putting the land reform process in high rather than low gear – without a clear economic plan and sufficient support for new farmers – would only have had a negative impact on the country’s economy:

“Had we distributed significantly more commercial land in a shorter time to the previously disadvantaged, this would have seriously compromised Namibia’s potential in terms of meat production, our export capacity for the international market, and also foreign revenue generation for the country. And so I say: Maybe the slowness of the land reform process is a blessing in disguise.”

‘We cannot all be farmers’

What impact does this shift in ideas have on people’s expectations and needs with respect to land reform?

With the shift from the political to the economic, government and other stakeholders in agriculture are clearly – and honestly – admitting that land reform is unable to fulfil political promises. Land reform in its present form can neither ‘address the wounds and injustices of the past’ on a large scale nor provide the poor masses with ‘land for livelihood’ as a fulfilment of the promise of the liberation struggle.

In practice this means that land reform is not a suitable instrument to address the emotional as well as the economic needs that have been politically and traditionally associated with land.

The question arises how the thousands of Namibian citizens – and voters for the present government – who have applied or still intend to apply for resettlement, will be informed and guided through this change in land reform objectives.

Farmer Andreas Amushila feels that citizens should not be left in the dark, even if this is a politically sensitive topic for politicians:

“Our politicians, they want to be praised, and they use land reform for their election campaigns and promise a lot of things. It would make things better if they would tell people the truth: Rome was not built in a year.”

Vehaka Tjimune is therefore pleading for more information and transparency in the land reform process, while warning against more false promises:

"If people are becoming impatient, it is because we do not take our electorate through an educational process ... I have not heard anyone saying: We Namibians cannot all be farmers. If realism accompanies the process of land reform, I think the electorate will understand it."

The creation of new emotions

While there is recognition that "Namibians cannot all be farmers", the Namibian government has yet to offer an acceptable alternative to earning a livelihood in order to meet some of the expectations that came with independence. Unfulfilled promises for land will not make expectations for a better livelihood go away. Sooner or later they will create even more emotions about land reform that are not rooted in past wounds, but in present disappointments.

Feelings of frustration and bitterness with the slow pace of the land reform process are already growing among the huge number of applicants for resettlement, especially when there is a lack of information. I met Namibians who have filled in numerous application forms and appeared regularly at the regional offices of the Ministry of Lands and Resettlement to inform themselves about conditions and criteria for resettlement, but have never received an answer or explanation.

Thomas Skrywer, a young man from the south, expressed his utter frustration as follows:



Katharina Thölken

"If you apply for resettlement, you never hear if you were successful. You sit there with expectations and you need an answer. You need to know whether you succeeded or you failed. This is the worst, never to know what you did right or wrong. Do I have too many or too little animals? What are the things that qualify me? If you knew that, you can work towards getting qualified, you could change things."

In addition, Prime Minister Angula admitted that strong feelings of failure, lost dignity and betrayal (by the government) could develop, when too many farmers feel overwhelmed by the challenges of modern farming, by heavy financial burdens and by a lack of outside support:

Thomas Skrywer

“If people are resettled and they cannot make a success of it, then after some years people are returning to the communal land and might incite other people, because they have failed on a farm. And their dignity has been tainted, because they see themselves as failures.”

Last but not least, if more and more people realize that not all, but only some ‘land hungry’ will receive land, anger about alleged corrupt and nepotistic practices will grow. The young generation in particular, strongly criticized the fact that often, well-off officials or politicians were benefiting from land reform instead of those who needed land in order to improve their lives. A student formulated it as follows:

“Land reform is not for the poor. Land ends up with company managers, permanent secretaries, politicians and in general with people who are already rich. They have farms to get away for the weekend, while the landless wait for years with little hope of being resettled.”

In this way, land reform is seen less and less as a means to build a more just and equal society, but rather, according to the same student, as “counter productive and as increasing socio-economic polarization.” The topic of land reform may, therefore, become increasingly emotional because of present rather than past injustices.

And yet: in spite of serious economic difficulties, in spite of the lack of sufficient and efficient government support, in spite of disappointments and the experience that land neither automatically provides livelihood nor makes you rich, people continue to apply for land or stay on the piece of land that was allocated to them.

Of course poor people in Namibia do not have that many alternatives to earn a living. But the question remains whether there are – beyond the need for ‘land as livelihood’ - still other motivations behind the decision to apply for a piece of land?

After numerous interviews with officials and experts, as well as reading the relevant literature on the challenges of land reform, I was eager to visit a number of resettlement and affirmative action farmers to see with my own eyes how they were coping, and in which way land continued to be important to them.

While studying analyses of land reform and discussing the topic with ministers, agriculturalists and farmers, I soon came under the impression that the redistribution of land in Namibia so far could in most cases only be described as a failure, a catastrophe, a nightmare.

Resettlement farmers have apparently remained poor and more often than not are seen to be helpless, untrained families who neither have the money nor the experience to make use of the piece of land that was given to them. Others are described as people with good jobs in town, who use their resettlement farm as a cheap investment, for which they did not have to pay anything and which they just visit over the weekend or once a month, if at all. Farms are seen to lose their productivity while their infrastructure is crumbling.

Affirmative action farmers are described as sitting with debts 'up to their necks', leaving their farm untended for most of the time because they have employment in town or because they are allegedly renting their land back to commercial farmers in the neighbourhood, so that they have some income to repay their debts.

In spite of negative criticism and alarm, I tried to remain open to whatever I would see and hear by farmers themselves, and was intrigued if I would find anything other than 'everything going down'.

One of my questions was: Why are people still applying for resettlement, even when they see that resettlement farmers struggle and remain poor?

What people said ...

Before visiting several resettlement farms I used every opportunity to talk informally with commercial farmers in the same area, with shop owners in nearby villages, with the owners of service stations, restaurants and guest farms - and with the (black) chemist who sold me headache pills (and who insisted that it was the land reform that gave me the headache!).

The difference between how resettlement farms were seen by outsiders, who usually had never visited one, and how resettlement farmers saw themselves was quite striking.

Some remarks from black and white neighbours, when I asked them what they heard and knew about the resettlement farms in their area, were:

- "The resettlement farms are a catastrophe. The resettled people do not know anything about farming, the farms are far too small, there are water problems, and they do not take responsibility."
- "Productive farms are divided into smaller units and become unproductive. A resettlement farm can feed one family at most, but there is no contribution to the economy to the country."

- “So many farms are broken down. The farm Rooidam, for example, had a beautiful house and a pool etc., but today the water is green and dirty and the place is full of mosquitoes. This is horrible; this is not what we want.”
- “These farms are assets, the government paid for it, and the country’s assets must be developed. People move to resettlement farms, but then they do not stay there, they just leave them alone. I can see that many resettled farmers do not look after their farms well, they let the infrastructure dilapidate. I strongly disapprove of this.”

Some remarks by black and white business people were:

- “I predict that in ten years’ time land reform will be a catastrophe – economic, social, political. To take away land from people who farm productively and to give it to people who let everything disintegrate cannot be good. How must people feel as citizens of this country!”
- “Resettlement makes no business sense whatsoever; farms disintegrate while at the same time new farmers remain poor.”

There was no difference between white and black business people and between white and black farmers when criticizing land reform, the government’s policies and practices, and the economically less successful resettlement and affirmative action farmers in their area. In general, there was little understanding for the struggling new farmers, and resettlement farms were usually written off as a ‘complete failure’.

... and what I found

I visited resettlement farms in the south, near Maltahöhe, in the Dordabis area in central Namibia, and in the vicinity of Otjiwarongo and Grootfontein further north. Although not all resettlement farmers live permanently on their new farms, I was lucky to meet most of the owners. Where the owner was not present, I was able to speak to family members or to farm workers, and in this way could also gain an impression.

Yes, I did find poverty. There were very few resettlement farmers who did not struggle economically. I did not find any resettlement farmers who felt fully equipped, both financially and through knowledge and experience, to enter the commercial market and be competitive with other commercial farmers.

Most new farmers also lacked the government support that was to be part and parcel of the resettlement programme. Insufficient water was a serious problem mentioned by almost every farmer, as well as the lack of trucks to transport their animals to auctions or abattoirs for sale.

And yet I did not find many farmers who really complained. I did not find a single farmer who wanted to go back to the communal area where they came from. And I did not find a single farmer who said life had become worse than before. What I found was quite surprising, because – in spite of the nightmares - I also found happiness, contentment and gratitude. Why was this so?

Two women resettlement farmers

One of the first resettlement farms that I visited was in the south of Namibia, near the town of Maltahöhe. Most of the resettlement farms in this area had belonged to German farmers before independence and were bought by the government during the 1990's.

One of these resettlement farms was the farm Kleinfontein of Mrs. Rachel Cinana (described in the first chapter), who presented herself as the extremely proud owner of her piece of land and of the beautiful and well kept farm house, built by the previous German speaking owner.



Katharina Thölken

Resettlement farm Halifax

While I could clearly see that life on this small and dry piece of land must be difficult indeed, I was surprised at the happiness of the Cinana family about their farm and the way they lovingly took care of every tree and plant. What was even more striking was the importance Mrs. Cinana attached to having a safe living place for the rest of her life, for herself and her extended family, and that she had been prepared to give up a secure job for this.

With this impression still fresh in my mind I visited the next farmer, and again I found a woman, who appeared to be a happy farm owner, despite hardship and poverty.

Flowers at Halifax

I turned off onto a road which lead me even further into the dusty, grey bush veldt. My two local guides advised me to drive to farm Halifax, which had also been divided into several resettlement sections.

Before reaching the first cattle post I saw from far bright patches of orange flowers in front of a small house, half brick, half corrugated iron. Getting nearer, I noticed an old woman standing in the midst of her orange flower garden, watching us suspiciously. Three naked toddlers were playing in the yard, two young men started walking from the nearby sheep kraal towards the house, a young woman emerged from the kitchen.

I got out of the car and greeted everybody, and the old woman introduced herself as Ms. Maria Witbooi. Again I heard the sentence: "This is my home, I am the owner of this farm." We were invited onto the terrace, and after a while the mistrust disappeared.

Halifax was also formerly owned by a white farmer. Witbooi applied for resettlement in 1996 and not much later received a piece of land. She settled on a cattle post and had to build her own house.

Maria Witbooi has always been an enthusiastic farmer. "I know what goats and sheep need and I know how to treat them," she explained. Before, she had lived on communal land further south, owning about 50 goats. But there it was difficult and frustrating to live out her passion for farming. "There were no camps (fenced off areas) and I had to run after my sheep all the time", she remembered. "When I got older I could not do that anymore. I decided to apply for resettlement so that I could have small camps and better control over my animals."

She also disliked the crowded conditions in the communal area. "We were sitting on top of each other and this created many problems. People were fighting."

Today Maria Witbooi has her own place, and her flock of 50 goats has increased to 145, grazing in four different camps. Her children and grandchildren help her with the more strenuous tasks, and there is plenty of space for them to stay with her.

Just as with Rachel Cinana, owning her own farm did not provide Maria Witbooi with a life without challenges. She was forced to sell some young animals because of the drought. "A good farmer sells animals while they are still strong", she explained.

Another problem is that the boreholes of the other three resettlement sections of Halifax have collapsed, and her neighbours have to use her dam to water their goats. She understands that they need assistance to repair the boreholes: "Until that time we share the water, it's okay."

"I am very content here", she said at the end of the interview. "Here I feel free, I am on my own, and most of my problems have been solved."

"Do you have any wishes for the future," I asked and our guide translated my question into Nama. The old woman seemed to be embarrassed about this strange question after what she has just told us. She slowly shook her head and smiled. "No, no more wishes."⁶⁶

A sense of belonging

What I found confirmed that resettlement farmers do indeed struggle. It is probably also true that agricultural productivity decreased when farms like Kleinfontein or Halifax were converted from a single commercial farm into resettlement portions. However, I also found a situation which might be more important than economic statistics: people who are extremely proud to have become independent farmers and whose quality of life has improved substantially. Through resettlement they enjoy the opportunity to plan their own lives, accepting the challenges and risks of farming as independent land owners.

Most of all they were happy that they had a place of their own, and this was a feeling that I encountered on several resettlement farms: the farmers' deep satisfaction that they now had a piece of land where they were in control of their animals, of their work and family life.

It is true that ownership of resettlement farms is vulnerable and that the majority of farmers do not even have a contract or lease agreement – at least not yet. And yet, having this farm, given to them by a black government, elected by a black majority, still means much more security than what people have ever experienced before. In contrast to their relationship to previous white apartheid governments, they had a basic trust in this government in spite of difficulties, let downs and disappointments.

Yes, also the productivity of resettlement farms has gone down – but were these farms so productive in the first place? It has been argued and proven that bad and unproductive farm were usually sold to the government for resettlement purposes and only in very rare cases highly productive farms. And even if productivity

⁶⁶ See Interview 15: Maria Witbooi

decreased - is economic productivity the only yardstick for measuring the success of the land reform process?

On the farms that I saw it became clear that land reform in many ways failed to meet expectations with respect to a substantially better livelihood and wealth, but that it fulfilled another very deep emotional and social need after the experience of insecure living conditions, forced removals, displacement and dispossession for the past generations: the provision of a safe 'home-land' in the true sense of the word.

'Why I really want a farm'

That the wish to have a home was sometimes of overriding importance when applying for resettlement is illustrated by the following example:

On one of the resettlement farms in the south I met a young man who had applied many times for resettlement, unfortunately until then without success. He told me why he so desperately wanted a resettlement farm, in spite of the fact that he and his wife both had a good job at the Naukluft camping site nearby:

"My aim is to farm productively," he replied, when I asked him why he applied for resettlement. "I have grown up with farming. I know how to farm. I know this area, I know the times of drought, and I know the rainy seasons."

"Would you move with your family to the farm, once you have been allocated a piece of land?"

"Yes, I would immediately take my 300 goats and move to the farm."

"But without your and your wife's jobs, and only 300 goats – would you be able to support your family? We know that many resettlement farmers keep their jobs in towns or elsewhere, because they cannot live from the farm alone."

"Yes, in that case life would be very difficult – with paying the children's school fees and further studies."



Farmer Maria Witbooi

Only when we talked a little longer, the young man explained that initially farming would only be 'part-time':

"So in the beginning the farm will be a second leg, and the other leg is our work. But for the future it is my dream, if I get a place from the government, to build up the farm."

"In that case, why don't you wait for a few more years before acquiring a farm – until you have more animals and maybe some capital with which to start? Or are you afraid that maybe by then no farms would be left?"

"You know why I really want a farm?" he asked after a long pause.

"I want a farm as a security in my life, for our old age and for my children. I cannot trust in my work alone. If I lose my work one day through retrenchment or so - what can I do to support my wife and children? Where can I go? Where can I stay? A farm is something which is secure. I want a safe place where nobody can chase me away."

During my conversations with resettlement farmers the desire to have a home was one of strongest emotions that emerged, and was often stronger than the wish to have a farm for 'livelihood' through profitable farming activities.

A home for many people

And indeed, today many resettlement and affirmative action farms provide a home for a large number of people – and probably for many more than before, when the farms still belonged to a single white farm owner. Resettlement farmers often provide a living space for poor relatives, old people and unemployed youth, who otherwise would have to live as squatters in the nearby villages, where crime and alcohol abuse is rampant. And even if some resettlement farmers do not live permanently on their farms, there often are farm employees or relatives who do.

New resettlement and affirmative action farms have obviously also become a focus for family celebrations, like weddings and Christmas, as well as for funerals – and in this way have become a new centre of family life for a large number of people who before felt displaced, homeless or marginalized.

On most black owned farms that I visited, more than ten or twenty persons were usually staying on one portion. For example on the affirmative action farm Kayas

near Grootfontein, I was told – and saw – how a large number of different people had found a home on this land:

First of all, it was the home of the owners and their extended family, which included a grandchild, two of the owner's brothers and two 'other young men', who were helping out with the cattle and goats.

Second, it was the home of several farm workers who were employed by the farmers: "one in the house, one for the cattle, one for the goats and sheep, and also people who do contract work – they repair fences."

Enquiring about a number of young women and children whom I passed on my way to the farm house, I was informed by the farmer's wife that the farm also housed about 30 San people:

"They do not have work, and they are not part of our family, but I somehow feel responsible for them. They came here because they have no other place to stay and found refuge on the farm."

The farm owners not only let them live on the farm, in tiny corrugated iron huts, but also try to help them with casual employment:

"Sometimes they do work. They cut wood and bushes and make charcoal. And sometimes they get some milk when they help to milk the cows. We let them live here, we do not chase them away. We care about them, and we have a social responsibility."⁶⁷

Farms like this, even if not economically highly productive, thus fulfil an extremely important social function, which in the face of Namibia's unemployment rate and rapid urbanization should not be underestimated. They provide poor people with a place to stay and a basic social network in an environment which is – in spite of continued poverty as in the case of the small San community – much more secure than the overcrowded squatter camps near the urban centres.

'Then I know this is my place'

The yearning for a home of their own also came to light when I talked with farm workers. Even when they felt relatively secure on the farm on which they were living

⁶⁷ See Interview 13: Thekla Kahiru

and working, they usually had an ambivalent attitude towards it. On the one hand, the farm was regarded as a home, especially if there was no other place which they could call such. On the other hand, 'having a home' on a privately owned farm often came with a lot of restrictions: while farm workers are usually allowed to bring their immediate family with them, this does not include adult children and the extended family.

As their house is situated on the private property of the farm owner, farm workers are dependent on the goodwill of their employers when family members come for visits or extended stays. In this sense their house is not a typically African home, where the extended family can meet and is always welcome, and it is also not a place to which children can always return in times of trouble or when they do not find work.

Selma Tiboth⁶⁸, 46 years old, has lived on the same farm since she was born. She went to school for a few years in a nearby village, but returned to the farm when she finished grade 10 and has been employed by the farm owners as a house keeper for the past 25 years. Her four children grew up together with the three children of the farm owners.

Selma Tiboth likes her work. She regards herself as well paid, and she feels respected by her employers. For additional income she is allowed to keep her own animals, and at present she has six cattle. Thibot has a strong emotional connection to the land, because her grandmother, mother, herself and her children were all born on this farm. But in spite of this connection over generations, Thibot lives in a permanent state of insecurity:

"The problem with which I sit is: what will happen one day when I am old, or what will happen to my children if I die? I do not have a place which I can call my own. This is not my place, and if I die, my children must leave this farm, while the white man's children (the owner's children) can stay here and take over when their parents die." But even if she was allowed to stay on the farm until her death, she is afraid that her children might lose the farm as their home once they have grown up, and that she will be unable to provide them with a safe haven should they get into trouble:

"If our children have grown up, they may not live with their parents on the farm any more. They can only visit them. They have to live somewhere else and look for work. So they go to town and move in with other people."

⁶⁸ Name changed

Because of poverty and unemployment in towns, Tiboth is afraid that her children might fall into bad ways, and that she would not be able to provide them with a place of refuge as other parents can:

“In town it is very difficult to find work, we all know that. And because the children cannot find work, they start moving around. It worries me that I cannot have these children near me and to have an eye on them, so that they do not do bad things. Maybe they take drugs or go into crime. I just have no control over them, because they are not allowed to stay with me.”

For these reasons Tiboth would like to apply for a resettlement farm:

“One day I will be old, and then I cannot live any longer on this farm. In order to manage and build the farm, the farmer needs young people, and then the old people have to go. Therefore I want a farm, so that one day when I am old I can stay there. Of course then my children must be there to help me, because I cannot do it on my own.”

It was clear that Tiboth did not primarily want a piece of land for farming. Farming activities would be an extra burden for which she would need help, but in the absence of alternatives this was the price she would pay for receiving a piece of land. But what she really wanted was a home. The piece of land could be very small, she explained, not more than a plot to build a house, similar to housing facilities in towns that she had heard about:

“I really wish the government would give us, who work on farms, a very small piece of land which we can buy cheaply, so that we do not have to go to Windhoek, where it is full and where there are lots of problems, where the water is expensive and where we have no place to stay. Then I know this is my place and we can build a small house and have some chickens, a place where we can live all together, when I am finished with work, when I am 65. We do not have to get a whole farm, only a small piece.”⁶⁹

Landlessness means homelessness

Traditionally ‘having land’ and ‘having a home’ was naturally connected. For centuries Africans have lived almost exclusively as rural people and having land and having a home were inextricably linked with each other. With colonialism and dispossession the corollary was experienced: landlessness meant homelessness.

⁶⁹ See Interview 19: Selma Tiboth

Even a number of university students shared the view that 'having land means having a home':

- "Land is more secure than a job; you still have it when you are old and you can pass it on to your children."
- "Land gives people safety and security, and peace of mind."
- "Land means safety and security for me and my children and a place I could call my own home."
- "Having land means having a home – that is what it means to us!"

Today therefore, many people hope that with land reform they will not only regain a means of livelihood, but also a secure home - even if they would not immediately move onto the farm. For these people land reform is not primarily seen as a programme for prospective farmers, but as fulfilling a social need which can be met by farming.

The intense longing for a safe home is rarely mentioned as a factor in land reform discussions, although it decisively motivates people to apply for resettlement. There is no statistical or empirical evidence confirming that this indeed is the case for many of the 'land hungry'. But what came to light during discussions with those who had received land and those who still wanted land was that the reasons behind applications for land were often very different from those that were automatically assumed.

Alfred Angula of the Namibia Farm Workers' Union clearly stated:

"Land is not only based on economic output, it is much more. It also has social aspects. Some people got resettled because they needed shelter. Many resettled people now feel a sense of belonging and contentment, they can say: Now I have a piece of land, at last I am fine, whatever comes, I am fine with what I have."

And Vehaka Tjimune agreed with this assessment:

"There might also be quite a number of people who do not want land for agricultural production at all, but simply want to get away from informal settlements and to have secure tenure outside towns".

A number of experts have, therefore, pleaded for a survey to reach an understanding of why so many people really want land. These surveys will, however, only make

sense if they take into account that expectations around land are shaped by emotions as much as by practical considerations of where and how to farm. Government could then apply diversified ways and means of land redistribution that would adequately respond to the multi-layered expectations of its electorate – based on real needs and not on political correctness or unexamined assumptions.



*Alfred Angula of the Namibia
Farm Workers' Union*

Different connections

From communal support to individual responsibility

By now more than a thousand black Namibians have received a piece of land through the different land reform schemes and have become 'emerging commercial farmers' on formerly white owned land. No matter what their original motivation was for applying for or buying land – they are now stuck with a piece of land that they own as an individual farmer in a commercial farming environment, and they have to come to terms with this new situation.

My next question therefore was: how do these new farmers connect with the land that they call their own? And how is the relationship with their land different from that of white farmers?

In literature on Africa it is often asserted that black and white farmers have a completely different connection with land, and that land has very different meanings for them. This assumption goes with the understanding that black farmers are strongly influenced by traditional African concepts of land, and white farmers by European or western concepts of property and land – meaning that white farmers regard land mainly as a means of production or an economic asset, while black African farmers have a more spiritual and communal concept of land.

Journalist Alec Russell of the Financial Times, for example, speaks of a “yawning philosophical gap” between black and white over what land means:

“For white commercial farmers it is broadly a commodity but, for many black African communities, land has a spiritual and emotional importance over and above its economic potential.”⁷⁰

This view was confirmed in some of my interviews:

“Western concepts of land are based on rational and economical use of land,” argued South Africa’s Bishop M. Dandala. “The resources should be optimally used. The African understanding of land is more comprehensive: land must feed

⁷⁰ Alec Russell: ‘Fenced In’, Financial Times, 5 November 2007

people, but it is also the place where you stay in connection with your ancestors and your progeny.”

Bishop Kameeta, at the beginning of our discussion also postulated a fundamental difference between European and African views of land, although he later revised it:

“The European understanding of land is completely contrary to the understanding of land in Africa. For an African, land is not just property, land is alive. All our ancestors have returned to the ground: they are living in the land. Therefore the whole idea of selling land was taboo because selling land is like cutting a limb from yourself and throwing it away.”⁷¹

Also, a number of farmers, such as Reimer Thiessen, share the perception that black farmers’ relationship with land is more spiritual and emotional, while white farmers’ relationship is more rational and economic.

“Besides the sentimental values attached to their land, white farmers regard their land as an economic factor, and therefore their farming operations are commercial enterprises. Black farmers, generally speaking, attach a much greater emotional value to their land. Also the ancestral past plays an important role.”⁷²

The reality on the ground

When visiting black and white farmers in the commercial areas all over Namibia, this general and widespread perception did not hold ground. Speaking with farm owners on the spot, I found a mix of all kinds of emotions and connections with land, both with black and white farmers.

Some white farmers felt a deep spiritual connection with their land, because their ancestors were buried on the farm; some felt a deep emotional connection or love for their land, because the land had been passed on from generation to generation; some described their relationship with the farm as romantic; and some simply saw their farm as an excellent opportunity for a free and independent lifestyle:

- “If you live on such an old farm as ours you experience the lives of your family and of your ancestors: it gives you security, because this tradition is alive and it provides you with something to hold on to. The ancestors, they are all around

⁷¹ See Interview 10: Bishop Zephania Kameeta

⁷² See Interview 27: Reimer Thiessen

us, you can simply feel it. It is very real, you can feel this hold.”

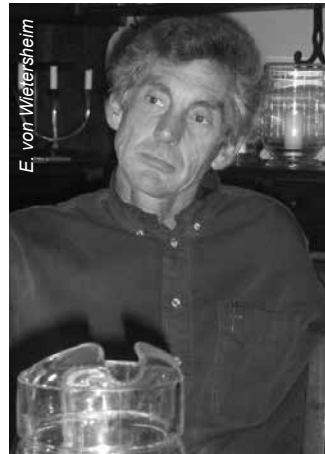
- “For me, land does not only have an economic, but also a strong emotional and romantic component. There is this love for the land, the vision to create something beautiful ... and a farm also means adventure: my farm is unexplored territory and I find this exciting...”
- “Farming is a way of life, the way I would like to live. It is often a hard life, because I have a small farm with high maintenance costs and long working hours, but still: I can take decisions independently, it is up to me what to do with the day, and I do not have an 8 to 5 job.”

The assertion that a spiritual or emotional connection with land – be it through ancestral graves, family tradition or simply love for the land - was something specific to black Africans, was thus refuted by the statements of white farmers.

On the other hand, not one new black farmer mentioned a spiritual connection with their farm. According to their various explanations the farm provided them the opportunity to advance economically, to have a safe and secure home, to lead a lifestyle that they enjoyed, to be productive and creative, to be free and independent. Some black farmers even saw their farm purely from an economic point of view:

- “We wanted the farm as an investment. We did not need money to buy it and we do not have to pay rent, and so it is a good investment to pay for the future of our children. We buy animals, raise them, sell them and put the money in the bank.”

I also heard many times the argument that black people, especially younger farmers, buy or want a farm for status and wealth:



Farmer Ulf-Dieter Voigts



Farmer Christine Voigts

- “Older people will think in the sense of farming, but the younger generation will look at land as status, as an asset. Land is important for status and prestige.”

But there was also simply the love for farming and life on a farm:

- “I love farming. I love sitting around my animals and giving them love just as to my babies. I talk to my cattle – look, there is my bull ... Farming is my dream.”
- “When I look at my animals I feel very proud that I have produced something. Farming is also a way to become independent – not to be employed but to become an employer and thus reduce unemployment.”
- “I love life on the farm, because it allows me to live near to nature and to God’s creation.”

Thus, also among black farmers there was a variety of land concepts and a variety of ways how people felt connected with or used land. It became obvious that white farmers in Namibia are not as ‘European’ and black African farmers are not as ‘traditionally African’ as often assumed.

White farmers have – consciously or unconsciously - adapted ways of connecting with land that is seen as typically African, while black Namibian farmers are influenced increasingly by what is seen as typically western concepts of land use.

Communal versus individual ownership of land



Farmer Thekla Kahiru

The perceived difference between black and white land concepts is of course not pure invention, but has its origin in two very different forms of land ownership in the past. These different concepts and practices of land use became apparent with the arrival of white settlers in Namibia and continued to divide black and white until independence in 1990.

Traditionally, black Namibians have practiced communal ownership of land. Land belonged to the community and was allocated and administered by traditional chiefs. Farmers were allowed to use a piece of land assigned to them in

a culturally accepted way, but it would always remain under the chief's authority and control.

Communal farmers in the same area would usually share the same culture, use the land in the same way, and their relation with land was culturally defined without much room for individual aberrations.

A man from the Ovambo culture would, for example, build his homestead, or his epya, according to clearly prescribed rules. An epya had to be divided into four sections, one for pounding millet, one for ploughing and planting, one for the cattle and one as living area for the family with clearly divided quarters for young and old, male and female, special areas for visitors, and a section for prayer and communication with the ancestors.

Although an Ovambo man would also strongly identify with his epya, it was not so much an expression of his individuality, but rather an expression of belonging to a certain culture and community.

This form of owning and using land strongly connected people spiritually, socially, and economically with their land. It also embedded them in a traditional setup that wielded strict communal control over land use on the one hand, but also provided generous community support on the other.

With colonialism, a completely new pattern of land use was introduced, although until independence exclusively for white settlers. Land that was confiscated by the colonial government was awarded or sold to individual settlers as clearly demarcated pieces of land for their exclusive use. White farmers were given individual control over their fenced-off land without much outside interference, and they had the right to develop, build and change the land according to their individual visions, plans and capabilities. They could also inherit or sell their land according to their own wishes.

White settlers were neither controlled by, nor were they embedded in, a traditional community around them; they were basically left to their own devices – economically, socially and culturally. Of course there was neighbourhood contact and support, but it was not to be taken for granted, not least because of the huge distances between farms.



Katharina Thölken

Famer Andreas Amushila

This land is my land!

The most visible symbol for the change from communal to private property was and is the fence. A fence demarcates the borders of a piece of land, indicates exclusive use and control by the owner and bars access to neighbours.

With the erection of the first fences more than a hundred years ago, Namibia jumped into a new era of land use and ownership, which not only meant the division of property, but also divided people into those who owned land, in the modern sense of the word, and those who did not.

“The first man who, having fenced in a piece of land, said ‘This is mine’, and found people naïve enough to believe him, that man was the true founder of civil society,” said the French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau more than 250 years ago.⁷³

Rousseau, however, did not sing a song of praise for this ‘civil society’, but heavily criticized it. For him a fence denoted the origins of private property, and with it the ‘corruption of human nature’, because with the first fence post, society started to train its members to think in terms of ‘yours’ and ‘mine’ and thus brought inequality into this world.

Other philosophers see the appearance of the fence in a more positive light. While fences result in exclusive control and inequality, they also signify personal commitment and responsibility to protect and upkeep a piece of land.

Christina Kotchemidova, for example, asserts that the appearance of the fence in human societies marked the beginning of “devoted agriculture”, because only once people exclusively owned a piece of clearly demarcated land they would start to develop, improve and take good care of it.⁷⁴

What does individual ownership imply in Namibia?

Individual ownership of farms – in the absence of a supportive and controlling homogeneous community – strongly promotes individual life styles, even more so than in cities, because farmers live in relative isolation. For example, a spiritual or emotional connection with the land, if it does develop, is not expressed as part of

⁷³ Jean-Jacques Rousseau: ‘Discourses on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality Among Men’ (1755)

⁷⁴ Dr. Christina Kotchemidova, New York University, ‘The Culture of the Fence’, www.nyu.edu/pubs/counterblast/fence.pdf

a publicly celebrated community culture, but becomes a private and individualistic expression and varies in its form, practice and intensity from farmer to farmer.

Individual ownership of land also allows farmers to build and develop their land according to their individual vision, and encourages them to put their individual stamp on the land. This process of personal identification with the land grows with the time a farmer or a family lives on a farm. This was repeatedly confirmed by white farmers.

- "I think it is important to have the opportunity to build up something in order to get attached to the land. By being able to build and develop things here, my identification with this farm was growing."

This relationship with land was particularly strong when farms had remained in the same family over a long time, and were passed on from generation to generation. Such farms may then also become part of a very strong family identity:

- "I grew up on this farm. My parents and grandparents developed it. I feel connected to this tradition: that is what happens when land is in one family for a long time. There are also farms that constantly change owners, I suppose with them it is different."

Often it is not the land as such that attaches people to their farm, but everything that was added to it:

- "Building the land connects me with the land ... and then, what you develop and build on that land you do not like to give away. I can separate myself from the land – but it is difficult for me to leave behind what I have built on that land."

What consequences does such a strong sense of personal identification with land have?

Negative consequences

The almost royal control that farmers have over the natural resources of their property can easily lead to misuse and exploitation. Overgrazing, indiscriminate hunting of game and cutting of trees is only, to a very limited degree, controlled by the state, and has indeed happened on white owned farms in the past.

Ownership and control of a farm by one individual farmer also means that all other people living and working on the same farm are excluded from rights to ownership,

tenure or domicile. They are – within labour law regulations – at the mercy of the owner. Farm owners can sell their farms without much consideration for those who are living on the farm, and they can also determine which people they would allow to stay on or visit their land.

With respect to land reform, the very strong personal connection that white farmers have developed with their land partly explains why the ‘willing seller’ principle is not successful. White farmers, who are expected to voluntarily sell their land for the sake of land reform, find it hard to part with their land, even if they would be well compensated. Losing their land would mean losing part of their identity. Especially farmers, whose families have lived on their farm for generations, would see it as a betrayal of their ancestors if they were to sell – not so much the land itself – but what was built on it during a lifetime or generations.

Positive consequences

The strong identification with their land helps farmers to endure hardship in times of difficulties such as year-long droughts and to stay on, even if farming becomes less financially rewarding. It often drives them to take risks, to invest generously and to remain future oriented.



Simone von Wietersheim

Fences and gates

Early pioneer farmers such as Alfons Schanderl already described (around 1921) how only the deep love of this harsh and uninviting land in central or southern Namibia helped him to stay and continue to build it:

“After bleeding, sweating and working for a country for 16 years you feel that you belong to that country, and you are devoted to it with body and soul.”⁷⁵

The desire to leave a mark on an individually owned piece of land also encourages continuous development from generation to generation, because every new generation wants to add their own footprints, explained farmer Harry Schneider-Waterberg:

“I think this individualism of farmers, which develops in a much stronger way on a farm than in town communities, is a contributing factor to a farm’s development, ... and that every generation adds something new.”

Furthermore, quite a number of farmers explained that identification with the land often goes hand in hand with a strong sense of responsibility, both towards the forefathers, who built the farm in the past, and to those who will continue farming in future:

“I grew up on this farm. My parents and grandparents developed it. I feel connected to this tradition. I feel obliged to maintain and care for this heritage,” said Ulf-Dieter Voigts.

“We land owners should be aware of the enormous responsibility that we have and make sure that the piece of land that is entrusted to us is managed for the benefit to all people living on it, and for the benefit of future generations. My guiding principle is, therefore: We do not own the land, we just manage it for our children,” said farmer Reimer Thiessen.

Consequences for land reform

For more than a century only whites were allowed to own land privately, while almost all black farmers were restricted to using communal land under the authority of traditional chiefs. Only with the introduction of commercial land reform after independence were black farmers given the opportunity to purchase farms as private property.

⁷⁵ Kanzler, Sven-Eric (2006): *Expelled from a Beloved Country*, Nature Investments (Pty) Ltd, Windhoek, p. 11

This initiated a completely new form of relationship with land: As private owners of a piece of land they were given full and exclusive control over it, but they were also deprived of traditional community support.

As more and more black farmers change from communal to individual ownership of land, their connection with land will necessarily also change: it will become more personalized, and it will enable more individual control and demand more individual responsibility.

Traditional forms of social control will fall away, but also the traditional support systems through chiefs and local communities. A completely new system of a multicultural and multi-racial neighbourhood will only partly replace this social, cultural and economic support system.

As it is quite a fundamental change, new farmers may definitely benefit from specific preparation and support, as Minister Willem Konjore confirmed:

“Resettled people need to be trained and assisted, because coming from a communal background of farming, coping with commercial farming is not obvious.”⁷⁶

Looking at the factors that promote productive and responsible farming on individually owned farms, some of the following aspects should possibly be taken into account:

Security of ownership

In order to encourage individual responsibility for the land, a strong sense of ownership will be very important. As land is no longer secured by chiefs and traditional customs, farmers need to know that ownership of their farm is legally secured by the state. They need to know where their farm begins and ends, and that they are legally empowered to have exclusive control and also exclusive responsibility for it.

Providing security of ownership is also important so that new farmers feel confident enough to invest money and hard work in their farming ventures and engage in long-term planning.

The security of long-term, or life-long ownership, and the right to bequeath land to their offspring could well form an important pre-condition for new farmers to take

⁷⁶ See Interview 3: Minister Willem Konjore

good care of the land for future generations, and to endure hardship when it knocks at the door.

Most new farmers expressed their satisfaction that they now had a fence around their land which gave them control over a farm which they could call their own, as for example, affirmative action farmer Thekla Kahiru:

“If you have your own thing, you are happy. If it is not your own, it is not good. I paid the government for this farm, and this feels good.”

But while affirmative action farms are bought on the open market, and their owners have full legal title to their farms, resettlement farms have a hybrid character: they are allocated to farmers for individual use, but they continue to belong to the state.

Theoretically, resettlement farmers receive the right to use the farm for a period of 99 years, but in practice almost no resettlement farmer has documentary proof of such a contract. A number of resettlement farmers seem to be unaware of the insecure status of their legal ownership; however, most know that the land in principle belongs to the government. As farmers are progressing with their farming business, they are becoming increasingly aware of this vulnerable state of ownership and are reluctant to connect emotionally with it.

When asking resettlement farmers about their biggest problem they did not speak about lack of money or outside support, but mentioned the fact that the farm did not really belong to them:

“I would like to buy the farm, so that I know it is my own,” said resettlement farmer Ronald Kazaruia.⁷⁷

And resettlement farmer Mr. Vries said, when asked whether he loves his farm:

“We would like a farm of our own. This place belongs to the government. They gave it to us for 99 years, but it is not our place, we just use it and must look after it. We did not buy it with our money, we just have a contract, a lease agreement for 1,578 ha. Maybe if we work hard, we can buy a bigger farm.”

⁷⁷ See Interview 16: Ronald Kazaruia

Opportunities for development

“A resettlement farm should be a place of empowerment,” said Minister Willem Konjore. This means that it is important to ensure that farmers do not only ‘survive’ on their land, but that they are given the opportunity to develop their farm step by step.⁷⁸

Providing new farmers with the chance and the skills to build their farms – through financial, technical and psychological assistance - will enable them to put their own individual mark on their land. They will begin to identify with it and thus, hopefully, be more motivated to take individual responsibility for protecting, controlling and using it to the best of its potential - both for the environment and for the people living on it.

Neighbourhood support

In the absence of traditional community support systems, it is also of utmost importance to create new forms of social support networks for new farmers, not only at a technical and practical level, but also to help them acquire the managerial and social skills that are needed to be successful in a commercial farming environment.

The mentorship programme of the ‘Joint Presidency Committee’ of the two agricultural unions in Namibia is an example where so-called ‘product and content mentors’ provide practical and technical know-how and assistance, while so-called ‘process mentors’ address the more psychological aspects of farming like communication, planning, initiative and responsibility.

But new farmers also need neighbours who welcome them as colleagues and partners, so that they feel supported as members of a community. This support was seen by all relatively prosperous resettlement and affirmative action farmers as an important reason for their success.

Many voices ... but we all speak one language

Returning to the question whether there is a fundamental difference between how white and black farmers are connected with land, one guess is that with commercial land reform, black and white farmers will soon have much more in common than ever before.

⁷⁸ See Interview Minister Willem Konjore

Living in the same farming area, having similar interests and problems, and sharing similar visions, is already leading to new associations of farmers that are no longer based on race, culture or ethnic group. But these associations will consist of a variety of individuals, each with their own way of farming and life, as both white and black farmers agreed:

“I think, in older times, the relationship with the land was very much shaped by tradition and culture, but today people develop their own individual relationship with land,” said white farmer Christine Voigts.⁷⁹

And black farmer Salomon Tjipura put it in a nutshell:

“Different people in different Namibian environments have different connections, but I do not think that this goes along colour lines. Land has a funny way of getting under people’s skin. You work on the land, you use it in different ways and it becomes part of your psychology. But basically farming knows no colour. We all speak one language - and that is farming!”

⁷⁹ See Interview 25: Ulf-Dieter and Christine Voigts

Which stories to tell

Some answers to many questions

I started my investigative journey, leading me from farm to farm, and through ministries, agricultural offices and libraries, speaking with black and white farmers, with students and ministers, with shop owners, waiters and people on the street, with three main questions out of many more questions in mind:

1. Why do people regard land reform as a 'highly emotional issue'?
2. Why do so many Namibians – with the new opportunities provided by land reform – want land?
3. What is the nature of the relationship between farmers and their land – and is it basically different for black and white Namibians?

Wounds of the past and fears of the present

With the first question, my vague expectation was that black Namibians are emotional about land reform because they were deprived of land in the past, while white Namibians are emotional because they may be deprived of land in the future. But I also expected a great variety of answers, depending on individual family histories, on present life situations and on culture and tradition.

However, from black Namibians, I basically received only two answers with slight variations: Land reform was seen as emotional because of violent land dispossession during the past, and because the return of land was a promise of the long and self-sacrificing liberation struggle. I received these very same answers from young and old, from men and women, and from different ethnic groups.

Most answers were kept very general; people usually talked about 'we' and 'us' and about those emotions that applied to all 'formerly disadvantaged', or to their specific ethnic group. This can be ascribed to various reasons, but it definitely showed that land reform still strongly evokes collective memories and collective emotions that are binding black Namibians together through a shared, vividly remembered history.

But while the common past of colonial oppression and apartheid has united black Namibians, the specific issue of land has also drawn a dividing line between those

who insist on the return of their ancestral land and those who never lost ancestral land and simply want a piece for farming.

This division was played down during the war of liberation, but it became plain after independence, when the general 'struggle for land' became concrete as 'land reform'. When the new government and its land reform programme clearly drew a line under the past, the result was that some wounds of the past have yet to find ways and means to be healed.

Among white farmers a much greater variety of individual reactions and attitudes were expressed, when discussing the emotions around land reform. For some it was also emotional because of the past, although they had stood on the other side of colonialism and apartheid until independence; for some it was emotional because of the dark shadow cast by violent land grabs in Zimbabwe, and for others it was emotional because they feared that with land reform 'the economy was going down'.

But more than anything else land reform was emotional for white farmers because of the lack of clear guidelines and the resulting uncertainties about land expropriation. Most farmers were not in principle against land reform, but they truly suffered from a situation where they did not know how to prepare themselves for measures that would affect their whole lives, as well as the lives of their family and of their employees.

But while some farmers wallowed in their fears and pessimism, many more farmers than I had expected refused to be influenced by prophecies of doom. Grateful for peace, stability and reconciliation under the new government and grateful that the guilt of apartheid was lifted off their shoulders, they agreed to learn from the Zimbabwe experience: instead of fighting the government at a political level by backing opposition parties, they decided to support and influence land reform by offering their expertise, time and cooperation.

This was, however, only possible because of the generous attitude of reconciliation on the side of black Namibians towards their white fellow Namibians. They showed an amazing amount of empathy and understanding for their fears and uncertainties, much more than what was known or recognized by white farmers, and, sadly, often much more than the other way round.

The situation of farm workers employed on privately owned farms proved to be particularly tragic, and they were generally described as the true victims of land reform. And yet, most farm workers appeared fatalistic rather than emotional about land redistribution. For them the worries and insecurities around changing land

ownership were nothing new; it has merely made their vulnerable position – which has existed all along since the introduction of private property – more visible.

Why people want land

The reaction to my second question ‘Why do people want land?’ also held surprises in store. I expected answers in line with the answers to my first question: healing the wounds of the past, being rewarded for the long struggle for freedom and justice, or feeling a sense of satisfaction to live again on the land of the ancestors. Instead I repeatedly heard that people want land because ‘land is livelihood’, with the expectation that land would bring wealth, prosperity and a secure economic basis for living.

The desire to have land appeared to be still strongly shaped by traditional views: land is seen almost mystically as the source of all livelihood and as the only place where people could feel safe and secure until the end of their days – even for people with jobs in towns, and also for young people. While employment in industries or government is seen as important and desirable, and increasingly so for the younger generation, land is still regarded by many as the safer, more secure and most reliable asset.

I also learned about the deep longing for land as a safe place to stay, a home from where one could never be chased away again, as it had often happened in the past. Often land was seen as just a means to this specific end. Using the land for agricultural activities would be accepted as a necessary condition for receiving land, and for some it was simply the price to pay for safety and security.

In Namibia today, both government and farmers have realized that land reform in its present form cannot satisfy these expectations – and that the reasons why people want land only partly coincide with government’s reasons to redistribute it.

Government basically allocates land on the assumption that new land owners want to become commercial farmers, while a large part of applicants for land might simply want land to satisfy social and emotional needs, which could possibly also be met by other means.

Farmers and their relation with land

My last question – how do black and white farmers relate to their land? – was particularly interesting and exciting, because I felt that I had my finger right on the

pulse of change. Old perceptions of a deep seated difference between black and white connections with land were being abandoned, and new ways of relating to land appeared that were neither typically 'African' nor typically 'European'.

White farmers, after generations of land ownership in Africa, have developed deep emotional or even spiritual ties with their land, and black farmers have become determined to make full economic use of their farms with the opportunity of private ownership – while both groups are ready to support each other in a new spirit of neighbourhood support.

This development is still in its beginnings, and yet a new spirit among farmers was already tangible during visits and discussions. Again and again I heard thoughts like “We farmers speak the same language...” or “We are one in farming ...”

I always wondered why these slogans sounded so familiar – until I saw along the roadside what I had often seen before, but never understood in its full significance: a huge billboard depicting a black and white farmer standing next to each other near a herd of cattle, both wearing broad-brimmed farmers' hats, overlooking the countryside and exuding an air of being 'one in farming'.

Displayed, right on top of this image – with green letters on a light blue sky – was the slogan of AGRA, a Namibian farmers' cooperative: “We all speak one language ... farming.”

I realized that this billboard not only reflects a new reality but that it has also helped to shape it. Farmers obviously found this vision of partnership and professionalism appealing and have started to put it into practice.

One of the most difficult tasks when summarizing my impressions for this publication was to choose which stories to tell and which stories to leave out, which stories to place under the spotlight and which stories to leave in the background. It was a difficult selection process – and confronted me with the age old problem of how to present an honest reflection of reality.

I am aware that for every story I present, a counter-story can be found; for every successful farmer whom I described, one or more stories of failure could be related; for every word and gesture of goodwill, the opposite could be cited.

But in all my discussions two things shone through: although it was 'land' that had deeply divided black and white Namibians in the past, land also has the potential to create positive multi-racial neighbourhoods in the future.

PART 2

Interviews

Selected and shortened interviews with Government ministers, farmers' and farm workers' representatives, church leaders, farmers and farm workers

“I would say, let us review this”

Interview with Nahas Angula, Namibian Prime Minister (2005 to 2012)

July 2007 and October 2020

Honourable Prime Minister, why is land reform such an emotional issue?

In the first place, land is a source of livelihood. Some people may want to use it for animal husbandry, and others might want to plough it. Even Namibian farmers of European decent are clinging to land, because it is a means of livelihood. Therefore you have to expect some kind of competition in terms of access to land.

In the Namibian context the situation is of course exacerbated by our history. Because of dispossession some of our communities had to retreat into what is called ‘reserves’, which led them to being deprived of their land as a means of livelihood. At the same time land reform in Namibia is being compounded by a number of factors which prevent the landless from having access to the land or being able to make land productive and improve their welfare.

For these reasons you can expect land to be a very emotional issue. People have great attachment to the land, even if they cannot have it. You can call it political or emotional, but for sure, there are strong feelings about land reform.

How has the focus of land reform changed from the time of the war of liberation until today?

It has not changed, but it has been constrained by the government for the sake of peace and because of the very emotional issue attached to land. You remember how at the first land conference Prime Minister Hage Geingob had to kill the idea of ancestral land. That was a real struggle. But the fact that the claim to ancestral land was formally abandoned does not mean that people have lost attachment to their land as something that belongs to their ancestors. For now it is constrained by the

government's policy of national reconciliation, but for how long that will hold is a big question, especially when the present land owners are using all sorts of tactics to circumvent the law and thus frustrate our efforts.

When can the land reform process be regarded as complete?

The basis of land reform is social justice. Right now, those who have been deprived of their land find it very difficult to access the land of their ancestors. This situation is not being made easy by those who have the land now. There are a number of statutory laws that have been passed by parliament, for instance the Commercial Land Act with all sorts of amendments, but the process is not working as it should, for a number of reasons.

Land owners are reluctant to let go, even those who have excess land. They apply all sorts of methods to prevent a genuine land reform process from taking place. For that reason I am quite sure that government, even with its land tax, will find it difficult to buy enough land on the basis of 'willing seller-willing buyer'. So, as long as the land owners are playing games, this process is likely to go on, even beyond our generation, and I cannot really put a timeframe to it. One only prays that it is not going to get out of hand, when people get frustrated.

In which way is the proposal by the Namibia Agricultural Union (NAU) on principles and procedures for land expropriation helpful? And which contribution to land reform would you like white farmers to make?

They are just defending their interests. It is not a solution to land reform as long as there is no genuine way of sharing this resource called land. Yes, one accepts that everybody must live, but there must be a balance, and there must be social justice.

Let us start with people with excess land, who have more than one farm and who know that there are other citizens who are looking for land. Why don't they sell one of their farms and invest the money they are receiving for it in something else? Another way is to share land that is not being used for agricultural purposes and to make it available to people who are not able to buy a farm. I am quite sure many upcoming farmers might say: I don't want to buy a farm, but I want to do some farming, because, if I buy a farm, I could end up not being able to repay my debts and end up in poverty. In this case it would be good if there is someone who says, yes, come and farm on my land on certain terms.

About 17% of all commercial farmland has been redistributed to black farmers since independence through the Resettlement and Affirmative Action Loan Scheme.

You say that land is owned by blacks who bought farms through Agribank - but are you sure that those farms belong to black farmers? Or do they rather belong to Agribank or other banks? Are you sure that they paid the bank so that the land belongs to them? You see, this issue is debatable because you may be residing on a farm, but as long as you have not paid it off, it does not really belong to you, but to the bank. The title deed might be in your name, but it is just a nominal title deed in the sense that you cannot really handle that land in a way you want to handle it without the permission from the bank.

How does the land reform process support the aims of the government development plan Vision 2030?

Land reform is supposed to support Vision 2030. However, Vision 2030 depends upon production, and land reform now, through resettlement or the Affirmative Action Loan Scheme, appears not to be adding much value to agricultural production. - MEATCO⁸⁰ used to slaughter something like 200,000 animals per year. But I am informed now that this figure has drastically gone down to something like 170,000. This means that production is not increasing. Vision 2030 implies growth, and growth can only come about through production. As long as there are no comprehensive services either from government or from the established farmers to help the newcomers, land reform is not likely to make a contribution to Vision 2030.

Is farming really an answer to help people live a better life?

There are a lot of complexities about this. A commercial farmer will tell you, if he is honest enough, that you cannot make a living from farming alone, unless you have two farms and you were lucky enough to inherit these farms so that you owe nothing to the bank. Only then, you can entirely live on farming.

Access to land gives people opportunities, but you also need affordable inputs to make land productive, and that is what is lacking. Given the situation of the affirmative action farmers, or worse, the resettlement farmers, the problem is that initial investment. Even if you get loans from Agribank, you still need money to buy animals, to improve the water systems and to fence off the farm, and people do not have that kind of money. If you go to the bank, the interest rate is somewhere

⁸⁰ MEATCO is a Namibian meat corporation and the largest meat processor in the country, with two of its abattoirs approved for export to the European Union.

around 14%. When are you going to pay that back? That is why emerging farmers end up renting out farms to former owners for grazing. It is a vicious circle.

How can we get out of this circle?

If I had my will, I would say: let us review this. We have a public responsibility to enable those who gain access to land to be productive. This is good for the GDP of Namibia and it is good for employment, and farmers who are successful can create social support systems for their relatives etc.

If people are resettled and they cannot make a success of it, then, after some years, their land might be repossessed and they are back to square one. The resettlement process gets backlogged, and people are returning to the communal land and might incite other people, because they have failed on a farm. And their dignity has been tainted, because they see themselves as failures. But perhaps it is not exactly them, it is the overall system which was not good enough to make them succeed.

We should know that we are not going to solve our poverty problems through land reform, but we can at least help those who have received access to land to be a bit more successful and make proper use of their land. The public sector could support this. People need to develop trust in farming as an industry, as a business, and to do that you must have access to reasonable inputs.

Many white farmers today feel insecure about their future and this affects economic productivity. What can government do to encourage white farmers to use their full potential as Namibian citizens?

Nobody wants to live in uncertainty. Nobody wants to be in a situation where you don't know how to behave in a politically correct way. The government needs to do something about that, to set some kind of criteria. I think government itself is in a dilemma on how to handle this, because the 'willing-seller-willing-buyer' principle is not working and farmers use all kind of loopholes, but perhaps this is one of the issues we should try to address. What really is required is a genuine dialogue between those who possess the land and the government.

...

Mr Angula, 13 years later, based on currently available data, approximately 30% of freehold agricultural land has by now been transferred to black Namibians. Do you see this as a success or rather as a failure of the land reform efforts?

Success or failure of land reform in Namibia has to be measured in terms of continuing demand for land. Currently the land issue has become a political football. Affirmative Repositioning⁸¹ activists are focusing on urban land to gain political traction. The Landless People's Movement⁸² has used the land issue to gain seats in the Legislature. Under such circumstances, the land issue will remain relevant, especially in the absence of other viable means of livelihood.

Did the Second Land Conference in 2018 year address important issues that had not been addressed during the first one?

In my view, the Second Land Conference was just a public relations exercise. The Minister of Finance mentioned the implementation of some of the resolution in his recent Budget Review Statement. Perhaps something will happen in the future. Let us wait and see.

⁸¹ Affirmative Repositioning (AR) is a political movement in Namibia aimed at improving the socio-economic conditions of urban youths; it was founded in 2014 and is using social media platforms to mobilise people.

⁸² The Landless People's Movement (LPM) is a political party in Namibia, formed in 2016 and registered in 2018, led by former Deputy Minister of Lands and Resettlement, Bernadus Swartboo

“Owning a farm can be a nightmare”

Interview with Minister Dr. Nickey Iyambo

Minister of Agriculture, Water Affairs and Forestry

(2005-2008)

July 2007

Honourable Minister, why is land such an emotional issue?

For human beings all over the world land is probably the most valuable property in life, simply because everything you own is based on land, whether it is a building, a mine or a field. We can disappear as people, but land will always be there.

The struggle to free our country was about land, because a country is in the first place a country because of its land and its people. That is why in some African countries like Botswana and Zambia land is not owned by individuals but only owned by the state.

But in Namibia today we do have private ownership of land?

After independence we discussed the concept of land being owned by the state as a body that represents everybody, and, in fact, according to our constitution all natural resources are owned by the state. However, in 1990 we took over a system where some land was already allocated on an individual basis. For the sake of peace and prosperity we accepted the fact that all natural resources must be owned by the state unless they are already legally owned. We recognized the fact that other instruments were already in place before independence and that in Namibia land can be owned by individuals.

Private ownership of land remains the basis for the ‘willing buyer-willing seller’ and expropriation policies. Do you think this is generally accepted by Namibians today?

A number of Namibians say: The land that is owned by individuals today was bought by these individuals and they paid a price for it. Others say: The land was stolen or

confiscated from the black community; if you trace back the sequence of buying and selling the land and come to the original transaction, land was never sold. But even if land was sold, a crucial aspect is: Was the basis of transaction free and equal? Did those who bought land negotiate on an equal understanding of the importance of that land? And even when the land was paid for, was it precisely for the value that the land was worth, taking into account that land is the only property that will be there for ever? Can you, in the practical sense, ever put a material value to it? This is a very tricky question.

And yet we are saying today: It is not helpful to continue arguing with history. It would be unthinkable to go back to pre-colonial times and start rearranging things, because where would you start and to whom would you allocate which land? We do not know who owned precisely a particular piece of land.

Procedures that assign a certain value to land have been established and we have accepted the laws that had allowed white farmers to buy and own farms. But of course, this concept of land valuation is not 100 % satisfactory to all black communities.

When can land reform be regarded as complete?

While we acknowledge that things in history have happened, we have to take each other by our hands and move forward. We will use legal procedures to buy land from those that have land and give it to the landless, until at the end of the day there will be a balance: Whites have land and blacks have land also.

Many people say the land reform process has been too slow?

I admit that it is very slow, and many people believe the process should move faster. However, we know that moving faster with land redistribution will not increase agricultural production, simply because the newcomers do not know much of the ABC of farming. In Namibia, farming is very tough and acquiring land must be accompanied by training. If we had sufficient means to mentor those to whom land is made available, then we could maybe increase the pace of acquiring farms. But acquiring land without the means to assist emerging farmers will not be advisable.

One problem is that people believe that getting land will make them rich. If they see a fenced off farm, they don't see anything else but wealth. But as a minister responsible for agriculture I know that owning a farm can be a nightmare! Having land and farming does not mean you are rich, never! Having a farm actually means that you might have debts up to your neck.

Most resettled farmers neither have a lease agreement nor do they own the land that was allocated to them. Is this not a problem?

Resettled people live on land which belongs to the state. They therefore cannot use the farm as collateral for borrowing money from banks for developing their farms. Unless they have their own means to develop the farm, many new farmers are letting their farms crumble and we are seeing boreholes and fences collapsing.

The government through the Ministry of Lands is currently looking at providing resettled farmers with a legal instrument for accessing credit with the banks. But this is a very tricky issue, because if resettled farmers use their farms as collateral and then do not pay back their loans, the government might be confronted with the situation that a substantial number of farms will become the property of banks and the whole land reform process will boomerang. But in any case, government will have a formula that will make sure that banks will not take over, and another previously disadvantaged person will be allocated that farm to continue farming.

Therefore, if government wants to resettle people and wants them to develop the farms, we have to provide mentoring to new farmers and enable them to run their finances, manage their farms etc. We can say then at the end of the day: We have trained you and you know how to manage your farm. Now you can go to the bank and get money and implement what we mentored you in. All these things are going to work together in the end.

The question of expropriation causes a lot of fear among white farmers. Why does the government not provide commercial farmers with more security in terms of the criteria for expropriation?

It takes two to tango. The government has never closed its doors to discuss particular issues, and Namibians should not suffocate themselves with things that are lingering in their minds. Commercial farmers should go through their organizations to request a formal discussion in which their fears can be brought forward. The political environment in this country allows people to freely discuss issues, no matter how sensitive they may be.

The supreme law of this country protects everybody, and even if you decide in certain cases to expropriate, the constitution is clear that you have to compensate and that owners should agree with the price offered. Development is for every Namibian and that can only be done if there is peace, harmony and understanding in this country.

The Namibia Agricultural Union (NAU) as representative organization of commercial farmers is still seen with suspicion. Why is that so?

We have come a long way as people in Namibia, and people take things by what they used to know. NAU used to be a white farmers' union, serving white farmers' interests, because they were by design the only people that were commercial farmers. Today this is still the perception, although they have some black members too and are serving whoever is a member.

Also, after independence another union, the Namibian National Farmers Union, was established, taking care of the communal and emerging black farmers. I know that these two unions are actually working together, and maybe one day we may even succeed to have one union truly representing all farmers, I hope.

“All citizens should have a living space”

Interview with Minister Willem Konjore

Minister of Environment and Tourism (2005-2008)

September 2007

Honourable Minister, why is land reform such an emotional issue?

First, land is the livelihood of everybody; human beings need land to live on.

Second, in Namibia the original inhabitants are today without land because of our history of consecutive colonial governments, and if one takes into account the way the land was taken away and the way the land was governed, this makes it particularly sensitive and emotional.

It is true that on some portions of land the indigenous people have remained, but there are people who lost almost everything, in particular when the so-called reserves were introduced. The more fertile portions of the land were taken away and people put on small portions of infertile parts of the country. This makes it so painful and sensitive and I can understand that these people get emotional in different ways.

Is it true that some people in the south, for example, are disappointed that parts of their ancestral land is now given to people from other areas?

At independence we adopted the policy of national reconciliation. On this basis it was agreed at the National Land Conference in 1991 that ancestral land would not be an issue so that not two or more different tribes might claim the same portion of land, depending on the history.

For example, today the San people could lay claim on say Etosha. It cannot be disputed that they lived there, but we know that other people were also making use of it before it was proclaimed as a park, even if they did not live in Etosha; they would therefore also have a reason to lay their claim.

Therefore at the Land Conference it was agreed, based on national reconciliation and on being a unitary state, to leave out ancestral land claims. New programs

were developed to acquire land for the land hungry such as the 'willing buyer-willing seller' approach, where, for example, the stronger communal farmers are assisted through the agricultural bank to purchase commercial land for farming purposes, or where those who cannot afford this will be assisted by government through the programme of resettlement.

Sometimes it might be seen that people are resettled in regions where they do not originally come from. But one must agree that even before independence, despite the apartheid and Bantustan policy, people mixed with each other. As a national policy we do not deal with tribal restrictions any more, but we talk about Namibians. Therefore as far as I am concerned, it should be acceptable that somebody from the far north who wants to be resettled in the far south, and vice versa, is accepted.

What do you see as the main problem with resettlement?

With respect to resettlement the productivity and carrying capacity of a particular piece of land needs to be taken into account. People should not just get a piece of land, but utilize it productively so that it can contribute to the economic development of our country.

What could also make our resettlement process successful is to concentrate on middle class farmers. The stronger communal farmers qualify for the Affirmative Action Loan Scheme, the middle class farmers should be targeted for resettlement and the weaker farmers or beginners should first start in the communal area, establish themselves there, and then qualify for resettlement.

I am afraid that the demand for land increases with population growth, while the land size remains constant. So resettlement could also be seen as a kind of a transit to commercial farming. Farmers could be resettled for a number of years in order to improve their farming methods and increase the size of their herds until they qualify for an affirmative action loan.

Why I am thinking in that line is that resettlement sub-divided the farms. But the previous owner of the farm could only survive on that farm, because he or she was the only farmer, so that, particularly in dry years, they could rotate their animals. I am afraid that with the sub-division of farms and lack of rain as in the previous years I cannot see the success of those farms. Therefore a resettlement farm should be a place of empowerment, where somebody is put, not for 99 years but for a number of years, to establish himself and then become commercial.

Resettled people need to be trained and assisted, because coming from a communal background of farming, coping with commercial farming is not obvious.

Even people who bought farms through the Affirmative Action Loan Scheme need training and assistance. The size of land, the number of people and animals living on it, and the management of the farm all play a role when it comes to the aspect of quality farming.

Do you think that some resettlement farmers are also interested in the tourism industry?

Of course selection of beneficiaries must be made properly. If a farm is bought with tourism facilities, people should understand that this farm is not for stock farming only, but that the tourism facilities should be utilized productively. In order to maintain the standard and value of the farm they must be willing to learn and become involved in tourism.

Up to now particularly our black people are, for example, not used to game farming. Game for them is something that runs in the field, and every now and then I can shoot it. But I say to people: Do not see in a kudu only the meat, there are other values as well. You can use it for game viewing or for trophy hunting and still have the meat.

What can be done to contribute to peaceful land reform?

Every human being is in need of a living space, and the sooner we Namibians realize that, in particular those having land, the better. This is where the owners of land could be more forthcoming in offering land to those waiting for land.

On the other hand, people who are land hungry should realize that land reform is not just about possessing land but about utilizing it productively. Both sides need a clear understanding of the land issue. Everyone is entitled to a living space, and if I possess land and you don't, I must be prepared to share. But those who want land should be prepared to make a contribution to the economy of the country and not just follow the shadow of the house from one side to the other.

For me it is also unfair that people living in Germany or in South Africa possess huge farms in Namibia. They do not need the farm for a living space here, but have a living space elsewhere and just use the farm for leisure. In this case the owners could agree to keep only part of the farm to enjoy the feeling of having a piece of land in Namibia but sell the rest. This would really help to address the land problem.

I agree that it will never be possible that all 2 million Namibians have a farm. Therefore farmers should get farms, and not anybody. But all citizens should have a living space. Then to me the land question will have been addressed.

“We urgently need clear guidelines“

Interview with Mr. Harald Koch

Acting Director of Rural Water Supply in the Ministry of
Agriculture and Forestry

August 2007

Mr. Koch, how is land reform progressing?

Land reform has started to slow down and there is nothing much happening on those farms purchased by the government. Most of the time the infrastructure of farms is already broken before new farmers are even resettled on these farms. I have just seen such a farm near Karibib. All farm gates are missing, and the fences and buildings are broken.

If this is so, why do so many people still want a piece of land from the government?

For most people it is important to say: I own a piece of land! Land is a status symbol. I have just visited a farm in the east that has recently changed owners, and it now belongs to a black farmer. But the white farmer continues to farm on it as before. He pays a certain amount of rent, but otherwise nothing has changed, just the status of ownership.

Many people just want a farm, even though they do not know how to use it productively. In the Oshikoto region, for example, I was recently requested to repair 30 boreholes, 29 diesel engines, 30 water pumps, 24 cement troughs, 27 steel troughs, 46 zinc dams etc. People would like to farm, but they are not in a position to do these repairs on their own.

How is the cooperation between the Ministry of Agriculture and the Ministry of Lands and Resettlement?

It is weak, and this is mainly due to the ministry officials. Everyone is busy with their own resettlement farm or with further studies. They are not enough involved in their work.

Another problem is: Our ministry has the technical know-how, but the Ministry of Lands has the money. And when the Ministry of Lands does not provide us with money, we cannot do anything. It would have made more sense to place land reform under the supervision of the Ministry of Agriculture. Now they have the resources and we have the technical know-how, while cooperation is not very good.

What are the specific problems?

There are no clear guidelines provided by the Ministry of Lands. We are now, for example, busy developing commercial farms in the north east, in the communal area. And we are asking: How big should the farms be? 1,000 hectares, 2,500 hectares or 4,500? Only the latter would be an economic unit. But we do not get an answer.

If the farms are supposed to be 4,500 hectares large, we could only develop 60 farms. When they are only 1,000 hectares large, we could develop many more, but on these small units people cannot survive.

The next question is: How far should farms be developed before given to people who have applied for resettlement? In the past, when the first German settlers came into this country, they just received a piece of land with demarcated borders, and maybe there was some assistance with water supply – for the rest they were left to their own devices. The colonial government said: We assist you up to this point, everything else, you will do on your own. And whoever did not manage had to find another way to earn his living.

The question is whether today the relevant ministries should be obliged to build feeder roads and farm roads, draw fences, provide water and then also build houses? The ministry should provide clear guidelines on these points.

Do you know of any positive examples of resettlement farms?

Yes, but only where people have money when receiving such farms, or when they receive a high pension from the government. I have seen such farms, they do not look bad.

What is the biggest problem of resettlement farms?

The biggest problem is probably the water supply. Farms bought for resettlement are usually farms with insufficient water. When such a farm is divided into portions, often that portion with the borehole is given to a 'comrade', and the poor settlers on the other portions are really having a hard time.

It is often said that white farmers only sell inferior farms to the government. Is this true?

Yes, I think there is some truth to it. Usually the farmers who sell farms are those who want to give up farming in any case. They have always struggled on their farm, and they know that they will struggle even more in future. With poaching and stock theft on the increase, farming has become even harder. And so I can imagine that a farmer who has been struggling all the while will more easily give up farming, while those who are living on better farms will say: My farm is a lucrative business, and even under present circumstances I am earning enough money and will not sell.

What would you like to improve in the land reform process?

First of all I would abolish the Ministry of Lands and Resettlement and integrate it into the Ministry of Agriculture.

Second, I would clarify the guidelines for land reform and expropriation with two important factors in mind: the criteria for expropriation and the way of compensation. Will I be compensated for my fences, yes or no? Will I be paid for my house, yes or no? For my guest houses and for my swimming pool?

Once there are clear guidelines, every farmer who invests in his farm knows from the beginning for what he will be compensated and for what he will not receive any compensation in case of expropriation. He can then decide where to invest or not to invest in order to keep the economy of the farm going without losing out in the end. This would give farmers a sense of security for farming productively until the day that they have to give away their farm.

I know farmers who say: I do not know if I will be expropriated tomorrow and therefore I will invest no longer in the infrastructure of my farm. I just take out as much as I can. When such a run down farm is expropriated, it is not of much use to anybody, because it needs to be built up from scratch.

Rather give farmers the security by telling them: You could be expropriated for this or that reason. And if you are expropriated you will be compensated for this and that. Then the farmer knows: I can keep my farm in top condition, because everything that I put in, I will get back on the day when I will be expropriated.

The second factor is: Land which is purchased for resettlement must be evaluated according to certain criteria. And if certain farms do not meet these criteria, they should not be bought by the government. Only land that is suitable for resettlement should be purchased.

Furthermore, nobody should be resettled who is not trained and who does not meet certain preconditions for farming. It should also be clarified what contribution is expected from farmers and what contribution the government will make.

It is really disturbing to see what is happening to people on resettlement farms. If you divide a farm of say 5,000 hectares into five portions, I foresee that in a very short time one party will dominate all others because the land is just far too little for five parties.

I would not divide the farms into portions but give one farmer and his family the whole farm. These families are often so large that in the end more than five parties will live on it in any case, but then they will farm together and they will manage the farm as a unit.

At the moment the economy is coming to a halt. A supplier of farming material in Okahandja, for example, told me that the farmers do not buy any more, because there are so many question marks hanging in the air. We urgently need clear guidelines.

“The slowness of land reform is a blessing in disguise”

Interview with Mr. Vehaka Tjimune

Executive Director of the Namibian National Farmers Union (2006-2008) and presently Senior Policy Advisor at the GIZ (German Corporation for International Cooperation)

July 2007 and November 2020

The Namibian National Farmers Union, NNFU, is a national federation of regional farmers unions. It was established in June 1992 to serve as a lobby group for Namibian communal and emerging farmers. The NNFU advocates and actively participates in land reform discussions and has embarked in various activities and programs as means to compliment, support and direct land reform in Namibia.

Mr. Vehaka Tjimune is a Rural Social Scientist and was part of the Permanent Technical Team on Land Reform (PTT) which was created in 2003. Its task was to review the current land reform process and to formulate strategic action plans.

Mr. Tjimune, why is land reform such an emotional issue?

It is emotional because of the historical injustices of the past. Colonial land occupation and the creation of tribal homelands by previous regimes influence how people view the present land reform process. The emotions around land reform cannot be ignored, and we need to manage them as we are going through the process.

How can you do that?

During the previous years of the land reform process, the NNFU has been very emotional. However, we realized that putting emotions to an already emotional issue is not going to help the situation. So of late we have changed to another strategy that focuses on the issue of economical emancipation for the benefit

of the new farmers and for the country in general. And for this I would love to completely eliminate emotions from this process, because even if you have taken all the land from the white commercial farmers and redistributed it to the previously disadvantaged, the reality at the end of the day is that we will have the land but will not gain economically from it.

Land is not an end in itself; it is a means for production. The land reform progress should therefore not be judged on the number of beneficiaries and the number of farms bought, but on its economic and social impact. This can be achieved by providing institutional and financial support to new farmers. Fuelling emotions will eliminate objectivity in this process.

But this would need time?

Yes, and there has been an outcry that land reform has been very slow. This slowness has been acknowledged by everyone. However, accelerating it without a proper plan and without proper support has not been proven to be efficient.

And so I say: Maybe the slowness of the land reform process is a blessing in disguise.

It has become very clear that the production level of farms in the present resettlement scheme and to a certain extent also in the Affirmative Action Loan Scheme decreased significantly. Had we distributed significantly more commercial land in a shorter time to the previously disadvantaged, this would have seriously compromised Namibia's potential in terms of meat production, our export capacity for the international market and also foreign revenue generation for the country.

But seeing that land reform is such an emotional issue, will people not become impatient?

If people are becoming impatient, it is because we do not take our electorate through an educational process, not even at government level. I have never heard government telling the electorate: Whatever we do, we cannot satisfy the land hunger of all Namibians in need of land. I have also not heard anyone saying: We Namibians cannot all be farmers, there is a limit to it, even in the life stock sector, because we are living in a fragile environment. If realism accompanies the process of land reform, I think the electorate will understand it.

Who are the people who want land and what do they want the land for?

We made a very strong recommendation in the PTT (Permanent Technical Team on Land Reform) report to undertake a qualification and quantification survey, even if it

is a bit late, to come to an understanding of the need for land. The only figure that we have at present is that of 240,000 people who need land. It is not clear how this figure was arrived at, and there is no data base showing if this list has either been stretching or shrinking. We therefore need a survey to qualify and quantify these land demand needs.

During this survey government can issue questionnaires which at the same time would serve as an application form for potential beneficiaries. On this form they would provide information on what they want the land for, and where. Some people might want to do small-stock production, others grow crops, and there might also be quite a number of people who do not want land for agricultural production at all, but simply want to get away from informal settlements and have secure tenure outside towns.

Applicants would also provide information on their economic status so that, when identifying potential beneficiaries based on specific criteria, some people might be disqualified and advised to rather apply for a loan at Agribank. Permanent Secretaries and Governors, for example, could be excluded. The figure of 240,000 people in need of resettlement would shrink, we would have a much more realistic data base, and expectations would be decreased.

For white farmers land reform is also an extremely emotional process. There is a lot of fear.

If I was a white commercial farmer today and look at the concept of land reform, the very first thing that comes to my mind is the level of uncertainty. I do not know what will be the next move. I do not know whether my farm is the next to be expropriated, because for me, the criteria for farm expropriation are not very clear. I do not know whether I should go to Agribank and take out a loan for say an investment period of ten years. I do not know whether I should invest in a new tractor because next year my land might be expropriated. This uncertainty will actually result in the production going down and the country will start feeling it. So for me, to eliminate that fear, government has to manage the process by making its intentions very clear.

Expropriation has happened in this country before, the Odendaal Plan was an expropriation plan. I am not saying its objectives were correct, but at least there was a plan on the table with clear objectives that the government could sell to the land owners.

For me, expropriation is not an issue of getting rid of whites, but a way to redistribute land for the benefit of the Namibian society. It would mean negotiating with white farmers about how some of their land could be expropriated, while they would keep

enough land to continue farming and using their skills productively for the benefit of the country.

How could the land reform process become more transparent?

We proposed in the report of the Permanent Technical Committee to establish a 'Negotiated Land Reform Forum' which would help to make the land reform process more transparent through public debate. An open debate is the only instrument that will take away fear. People would know what to anticipate. And this forum should then inform and advise government on the next level of action.

It would, for example, advise how to use a certain area of land that was acquired by government in the most productive way, and at the same time it would look at factors such as extension services to the new farming community and services such as schools and hospitals. For me it would be very important not to expropriate single farms, but to expropriate in small clusters so that we can create a community of beneficiaries and provide them with the agricultural and social services that they need.

During our trip to Zimbabwe, we asked both the commercial farmers and land reform beneficiaries, what went wrong with the land reform process in their country, and everyone acknowledged: Had we sustained the debate around the table, many things could have been avoided. So let's continue with the debate, even if we bring very emotional persons to the debating table. Let everybody realize that everyone around the table can say what they want to say, as long as it is done in a manner that will sustain that debate.

...

November 2020

Mr. Tjimune, 13 years have passed since our last interview on land reform. By now, about 30% of freehold agricultural land has been transferred to black Namibians through the different land reform instruments. Do you see this as a satisfactory pace?

I would say in the greater scheme of things, yes. Before our first interview 13 years ago, I came from the extreme view of land reform being very slow to the view that the slowness of land reform was a blessing in disguise. Now, 13 years later, a lot of things that were hidden in my statement of "a blessing in disguise" have become evident.

In the first instance, the amount or percentage of acreage that government is transferring from white owned farmers to black Namibians is no longer an objective in itself. Land is a basis of production, and for land to be productive, other factors are important. Simply transferring land is self-defeating. In fact, government has been buying land out of production.

What do you mean by that?

If you look at the farms that have been acquired by government and if you could look at the production records of the new entrants, one would actually see a general trend where the output of the farms have gone from high to low. According to the productivity survey that we conducted through the Permanent Technical Team on Land Reform in 2003/04, beneficiaries who bought land through Agribank were utilizing up to 45% of the production capacity of the land, while the resettlement beneficiaries used up to 35% on average. This means that this land has been degraded from a production point of view.

While many of the previous owners were in a position to produce and sell, to create employment opportunities and to contribute to the local and the national economy by paying taxes, most resettlement farmers are not able to contribute to the national economy, and we have to ask ourselves: Is this a sustainable model or situation? When we are not paying attention to production and are just distributing land (as a political objective), in the end, it means that we have been depleting the resource pool of people capable to produce and be in a position to pay taxes. In financial terms, what has happened is as good as a “mis-investment”.

I'm glad that Minister Calle Schlettwein, the Minister of Agriculture, Water and Land Reform, recently took a decision in 2020 to not purchase more land for resettlement in the near future, but rather use the available budget allocation for supporting production of the acquired farms. I support this decision, and I hope that this serves as a small “moratorium”, so that he can go back to the drawing board and plan better how he wants to undertake land reform when resources permit. The lack of money to buy more farm land will force us to make even better plans. Again, a blessing in disguise.

Do you have an idea how the transfer of land could be improved?

I am also propagating the following model: In any business two people can co-own a business. So, on the farmland, which is also a business, why can't we co-own land? Why should actually one be bought out for another one to get in? Why can't two families, one previously advantaged, the other one previously disadvantaged, not co-own a farm? Of course there are difficulties, especially if the new co-owner

has to buy in. The new co-owner is always at a disadvantage, because he or she has to pay for the land and also service the portion that he/she got. In that case, the government could support the new entrant through a grant to put the two co-owners on an equal level.

Maybe the traditional production models will not be suitable, for example a typical livestock production model. Other land-use models could be more viable to support and sustain a model of co-ownership for example game and tourism ventures. Look at the Gondwana⁸³ land and ownership or shareholding model - and why can it not be replicated elsewhere?

Have the emotions around land reform changed during the past ten years?

During the Second Land Conference in 2018, which I attended, there was a mixture of emotions. There is still the need for land, but there is also the emotion of disappointment, because the resettled farmers feel that resettlement has not helped them to live a better life.

And then, there is a shift, because people are now asking a question that was never posted to them before: **needing land for what purpose?** This becomes apparent in the shift from the demand for farming land to a demand for urban land. Before, when people were saying, we need land, we gave them farming land, whereas, in reality, many just needed some small piece of land in an urban setting.

I see this as a missed opportunity, because instead of buying millions of hectares of agricultural land, we could have invested in urban land including the provision of some services. How many families could have been resettled by this time on urban land? So the real emotions have shifted towards urban land, and a lot of people are now protesting in urban areas. This in a way lowers temperature on farming land and allows time for better planning and implementation.

⁸³ Gondwana Collection is a local hospitality group with more than twenty properties countrywide. One example of their kind of land use: "The Gondwana Canyon Park is a very good example of a place where farmers and their families and workers once eked out a meagre existence through farming, which is not sustainable in that area. A socio-economic study conducted by the Gondwana Collection at its Fish River Canyon enterprise comprising of the park and three lodges revealed that production per hectare was 34 times greater with tourism as a land-use form compared to commercial or communal farming. Today the Gondwana Canyon Park is an open area with no fences, and it provides high-quality and sustainable employment to more than 100 people. Nature, which was fought against with all means in the past because it competed with farming, has rebounded and it is amazing to see how robust nature is in such an open area with no fences." (Gys Joubert, CEO of Gondwana Collection Namibia since January 2017)

After independence, 70% of our population lived in rural areas, but a recent study on urban land predicted that by 2018 the urban population would be 50%. Included in these 50% are those who have been resettled on farm land. If they don't have the means to produce on the farm land, they will abandon it and migrate to an urban setting, looking for a better life.

But will they find “a better life” in the urban areas?

The quality of urban life in Namibia is a problem and you are exposed to very harsh conditions. In the urban area you always have to pay forward. You must buy fuel, while in a communal area you can go and chop wood in the veld. In many informal settlements ablution facilities are nonexistent, and if they do exist, it's a common area, which is a breeding ground for many diseases. And there are no safety nets and support systems like in the communal areas.

In most communal areas, even when we say they are overpopulated, half the village, if not the whole village, is inter-connected through family lines, intermarriages etc., which means that even the poorest household in the village has better chances of survival. Even an elderly woman, alone at home, is able to survive, because everyone is looking after her. When they wake up in the morning, they look at her house and say, was she ever out, no I haven't seen her yet, can you go and check?

In an urban setting this will not usually happen. I am a proponent of and strongly advocate for keeping our rural land productive and able to provide sustained quality livelihoods. To achieve this, we must deliberately invest in our rural economies and create better conditions as pull factors to keep people in rural areas and in future hopefully see a reverse migration from urban to rural areas. This is my dream!

What about ancestral land?

There are still emotional issues around ancestral land, and understandably so. In the first instance, the main emotion is that the land-dispossessed communities feel not heard by anybody. This is why President H. Geingob created the Ancestral Land Commission after the Second Land Conference in 2018. One of their terms of reference was to find out if there is in fact ancestral land, and if so, where that land is and how it is defined. However, for me, the mere fact that these fundamental questions were asked and investigated is already an answer to the land-dispossessed communities. The mere fact that you are asking these types of questions means that you doubted the existence of ancestral land.

I think that people fear the implications, if the reality of something like ancestral land is acknowledged. Some communities feel that they might then be left out from the

whole land reform conversation. Sadly, those who have not lost their ancestral land might think that those dispossessed communities, the ones who really lost their ancestral land in the past, would actually disregard their need to have access to land. They think that recognition of ancestral land will invalidate those communities who do not actually have true claims to ancestral land, that their chances of having access to that land will be jeopardized.

How can these emotions and fears be addressed?

Before the Land Conference, I was part of a group of people that developed a land policy for the Ovaherero Traditional Authority with a completely different approach to the resettlement process.

If we look at the demographics of the traditional communities, and we say, out of maybe 11 or 12 traditional communities, we have the Ovahereros, the Namas, the Damaras, San and others that we term the land-dispossessed communities – as a percentage of the rest of the population. Let's assume the land-dispossessed communities are 30%, for example. We could then take the current resettlement program and divide the beneficiaries into two groups, because the current resettlement program is only partly a re-settlement program; it is by and large a settlement program.

Keep this "settlement" programme for 70% of the population, i.e. for those who did not lose land, but whose traditional land has become smaller because of overpopulation.

And then you have a second program, called the re-settlement program, where the, for example, 30% of Namibian communities that have lost ancestral land can place their applications for land, so that those communities who did not lose land, and those who lost ancestral land, must not compete against one another.

The biggest frustration is, when you know a farm with a local name, and when you know that a family from a certain ancestral lineage is coming from that farm, and you know, when you submit an application, you now have to compete with someone who has absolutely no historical connection to that land.

So the suggestion is: Split the current program into two. If there are, say, N\$ 100 million for land acquisition, divide it. 70 million is for settlement (for the rest of the population), and 30 million is for re-settlement (for the land-dispossessed communities). Let the communities not argue with one another. Why are we creating perfect conditions for traditional communities to start fighting each other? This is unnecessary and due to our lack of planning or simply a lack of political will.

And still, many farms on ancestral land will remain in white hands.

You can restore sacred sites on ancestral land by expropriation, but there are also other ways for restitution. You see, many places, especially the sacred holy places where our ancestors are buried, are often on commercial farmland. This is why we sometimes go to some farms for a commemoration, like to the farm of Willem Diekmann.⁸⁴ Diekmann has no qualms with people coming to his farm for a weekend. He understands our culture and makes it easy for people to come.

Farm owners of ancestral land could, for example, make a piece of land available where the ancestors of a certain family are buried and say, this is your land. And so those, who also want to be buried there, can go back there. The reality is, not all of us want to be buried there, as our own biological mothers and fathers are also buried elsewhere in places where we reside now. In most cases this gesture will be symbolic and will facilitate access to sacred and holy places without hindrance.

Would that make some people happy and bring them more peace?

It will bring people together! It happened, for example, with the German speaking Voigts family and the Herero Zaire family - and it brought the two families together. It is what we call low input, high impact. You part with a hectare or two, and the impact and/or the goodwill is just immense.

⁸⁴ See page 93

“Land reform is basically a class issue”

Interview with Mr. Alfred Angula

General Secretary of the Namibia Farm Workers' Union

(2000-2013)

July 2007

Mr. Angula, how many farm workers do we have in Namibia and how many does the Namibia Farm Workers' Union represent?

There are about 50,000 farm labourers in Namibia, including farm workers on commercial and communal farms. It is difficult to give a definite figure, but we represent around 12,000 to 15,000.

What are the main problems of farm workers with respect to land reform?

One of their problems is access to information regarding available land to be distributed through land reform. Most farm workers do not have access to newspapers, and even when they do, many are illiterate or cannot understand English. They have problems understanding application procedures and getting involved in the process of resettlement.

Another problem is that you have workers whose families have worked on a farm from time immemorial; it's where their fathers and grandfathers have been working, and some of these farms used to belong to these indigenous people. At the Land Conference of 1991 ancestral land was not an issue any more, but it remains the core of some people's problems.

How many farm workers have so far benefited from the resettlement program of the land reform in Namibia?

We do not have figures on that. We normally advocate on behalf of those whose farm has been expropriated by the government. Currently when a farm is expropriated,

we ask farm workers whether they have an option for settlement. If not, they are encouraged to stay on the land, and then government will facilitate the process of resettlement for them and find a new shelter.

Many people regard the land reform process so far as a failure. Do you agree?

In whose eyes is it a failure? Is it a failure because people were in the streets and now they are on the land? You need to demarcate failure before you talk about it. Am I failing after having been placed on a piece of land, assuming I know what to do with it? Or am I failing after having been given adequate training and resources to go ahead with farming? You cannot just put me on the land and then say you are failure. Many people have experience with farming as they have worked on the land before, but what they do not have is access to markets and management skills.

I am not simply saying land reform is a failure. Land is not only based on economic output, it is much more. It also has social aspects. Some people got resettled because they needed shelter. Many resettled people now feel a sense of belonging and contentment, they can say: Now I have a piece of land, at last I am fine, whatever comes, I am fine with what I have.

Why is land reform such an emotional issue?

The question is why and to whom is it sensitive? Is it sensitive, because the poor are now getting access to resources? Is it sensitive because those who have been enjoying these resources are being asked to share them with their fellow citizens?

I do not believe that natural resources belong to one person. The natural resources of Namibia belong to all Namibians. - There is also the historic legacy that has disfranchised these people in terms of access to capital and market in relation to their white counterparts who, over time, have built a strong foundation of access to finance and markets.

Is there enough land for all Namibians?

We need to structure the use of land and agree on modalities pertaining to land use. How do we use land? Is it for food production or fundamentally for the survival of a person's livelihood? Who needs access to land? To me, first everyone needs to be given a basic share of land for their own livelihood, and after that some people can have excess land for agricultural production. At present, you have persons who have three or more large farms. But a piece of land is important for everybody.

What do you see as the main aim of land reform in Namibia?

I remember the slogan of the Namibia Agricultural Union: 'Uit die land kom die lewe' (Life comes out of land). That is the key and we are talking about poverty eradication in our country. You cannot achieve this if you do not have access to land.

Does the introduction of a minimum wage not also help to alleviate poverty? According to the Labour Research and Resource Institute (LARRI) study, most white commercial farmers pay their farm workers the minimum wage.

We are talking about the minimum wage to which I am entitled when I commence work today. But what about people who have been working for 20 to 30 years and are still on the entry level? Yes, today you pay them more than the minimum wage, but if you calculate that wage by the years they have worked, they have been working for peanuts over the years. When you visit workers, you'll see the food they eat, their houses, the beds they sleep on, clothing, shoes, their means of transport and their level of education as opposed to the assets of the employers.

It is always argued that the commercial agricultural sector contributes to the economy of the country. This is true, but I also want to see how it contributes to social livelihood.

Many emerging farmers on resettlement farms have remained poor. How can this be changed?

It is important to understand that we are talking not only about owning land, but also about having the economic power of possessing the land. We constantly hear people saying: We support your land reform. In which way are they supporting it?

Government is doing its part in terms of formulating policies and legislation, but we still need to educate the people and equip them with adequate management skills. It does not mean that if you have been given land, that this is a guarantee for success. One option is sourcing donor support to create support systems for resettled people so that they succeed in their endeavours.

How do you see the support program for emerging farmers by the Namibia Agricultural Union?

It depends on which glasses you are wearing. I do not have a problem with their objectives, but they might also be used as window dressing. Of course it is easy to criticize and I do not have much information on their programmes, but my suspicion is that in the long run they might create another class of elite blacks who will then pose the same challenges to their poor fellow blacks. It will degenerate into a black

on black issue. I cannot really see how that program is going to reduce the large number of the landless.

Is land reform then not so much a black farmer/white farmer issue but rather an issue of our capitalist-orientated system?

Yes, it is basically a class issue, a power relation issue. Who has more power in terms of resources and in terms of making the laws? The rich people who have the resources will always be the ones who make the laws on behalf of the poor, often barring certain individuals from gaining access to land.

The success of farming is also influenced by the terms and conditions of financial institutions. Their impoverishing interest rates are another form of discrimination against the poor majority. In this way financial institutions are supporting the unjust status quo. Because emerging farmers are accruing debts, the bank will repossess the land and it goes back to those who have the money to pay, it's as simple as that. It is a long term strategy, orchestrated to frustrate efforts of land reform.

How can we improve the relationship between rich and poor and between black and white in our country?

I think we have a big problem in this country. There is serious fear on the one hand, and there is serious mistrust on the other - and you cannot have the two at the same time; things will collapse. We need to identify each others' fears and expectations and to create trust. But trust cannot be created overnight, we need to sit around the table and start a dialogue. If we can all respect the universal rights of all human beings and are prepared to contribute to social development, we can coordinate our efforts to make a greater impact in land reform.

“We all speak the same language and that is farming”

Interview with Mr. Solomon Tjipura

Chairman of the Namibia Emerging Commercial Farmers'
Forum (NECFF)
August 2007

The Namibian Emerging Commercial Farmers' Forum (NECFF) was created at the end of July 2007 for so called emerging farmers. The term 'emerging farmer' refers to those farmers, who usually come from a communal farming background and are new in a commercial farming environment. These farmers felt that at this stage current structures like the Namibia National Farmers' Union (NNFU), which mainly represents communal farmers, and the Namibia Agricultural Union (NAU), which represents mainly established commercial farmers, did not meet their special needs. The forum is neither a permanent structure nor an additional farmers' union. It plans to work closely both with the NNFU and the NAU with the aim to work towards a common structure for all farmers in the country. Mr. Solomon Tjipura was elected chairman of the NECFF.

Mr. Tjipura, what are the special needs and interest of the emerging commercial farmers?

The NECFF represents farmers who have acquired farms through the Affirmative Action Loan Scheme and resettled farmers. Emerging commercial farmers in Namibia are in a unique position. 'Emerging' means that they are in a process of transformation. Their unique needs include tax concessions, clarification on the criteria to qualify for the Affirmative Action Loan Scheme, interest rates, length and conditions of the grace period before the first payment is required, and the whole post-sale support system.

What do you think is the main reason why black people buy farms or apply to be resettled on a farm?

There are different reasons. The main reason in my view is that historically black people derived their livelihood from land. So having land provides people with a sense of ownership. I think this is the biggest driving force, and often sentiments are stronger than economic considerations.

Land reform is supposed to correct the injustices of the past. At the same time land reform should be economically sustainable. How can the two objectives go together?

Land reform is a political process and it needs to address the injustices of the past. But politics should not override economics in this regard. We should ask questions like: Who should own a piece of land? Who is able to farm? What is necessary to succeed as a farmer? We have to select the people who are allocated farms on merit so that farming can be economically sustained.

Take for example the resettlement programme as it is now: For me resettlement is a total disaster, although its intentions were good. But we know, even the road to hell is paved with good intentions! Resettlement has just created communal hubs in the commercial area and it gave land to people without any knowledge of farming. Instead we should rather look for virgin land elsewhere in Namibia, develop it, select the right people, give them proper training and provide them with a good back-up service.

But this would take a long time?

For some land reform is too slow, for some it is too fast, that is the inconvenient truth! For those who see land reform mainly as a political process land reform is too slow, while those who emphasize economic sustainability would rather see the process to go step by step.

Do you think that black and white farmers have a different connection or attachment to land?

Different people in different Namibian environments have different connections, but I do not think that this goes along colour lines. Land has a funny way of getting under people's skin. You work on the land, you use it in different ways and it becomes part of your psychology. But basically farming knows no colour. We all speak one language - and that is farming!

Do you think that the older and the younger generation in Namibia have a different connection with land?

Yes, I think there is a slight difference. For the older generation land was the prime source of income, it was the basis of their livelihood, while young people today have various options to sustain themselves. They therefore do not attach the same value to the land as their parents and grandparents.

One factor that contributes to this changed attitude may also be the fact that, in general, it is financially not so rewarding any more to go farming, it is not really an incentive. Some young people even tell us that today you have to be either very rich or very stupid to go farming.

Isn't there still the perception that having a farm means wealth?

Yes, that perception is still a very general perception: land ownership will make you rich. And in one way this is true, because once you own a piece of land you own property that will probably increase in value over time. However, with resettlement farms the problem is that there is no real ownership and there is also no sense of ownership, because people get it for free. The Japanese say – there is nothing more expensive than something that you get for free.

When can land reform in Namibia be regarded as complete?

That's a million dollar question. I think it will be there for the next 100 years or more. Some things will change, for example, the term 'emerging farmer' will change, the specific challenges and aims will change, but land reform is an ongoing process.

In which way could the white commercial farmers contribute to a peaceful land reform process?

What I would like to see - and I see it happening now – is that people realize that blacks have the same right to land ownership as whites. Owning land is a right and not a privilege. You can still choose your friends, but you cannot choose your neighbours any more. We all have to realize that we need each other, learn from each other and indeed have something to teach each other. We are in the same boat, and if it sinks we are all drowning. We are still in the process of nation building, things cannot happen overnight, but we are on the right path.

Do you have a farm?

Yes, I have a commercial farm near Grootfontein, a cattle farm. It is not a walk in the park, times are tough, but I love it.

“Land hunger will never stop”

Interview with Mr. Sakkie Coetzee

Executive Manager of the Namibia Agricultural Union (NAU)

(2002-2017)

June 2007

Mr. Coetzee, how many farms have been expropriated so far?

Officially five farms have been transferred, excluding Ongombo West. Owners of about 30 farms (14 to 15 people) have received letters requesting them to sell their farms.

What do you see as the ultimate aim of land reform?

If we talk about quenching the land hunger, we must ask: will it ever be satisfied? White people are also still land hungry, although they have had land for some generations. Land hunger will never stop.

To me the ultimate aim is to get away from the black and white issue and from the distribution of land according to the percentage of ethnic groups, for example, that whites should only have 10% of the land, because they are only 10% of the population. Land should be used productively – also after land reform.

What are the main fears of white farmers?

Their main fear is grounded in the uncertainty regarding expropriation. Who will be expropriated and on what grounds? NAU presented an expropriation model to the Ministry of Lands and Resettlement and built in certain criteria as agreed at the Land Conference in 1991. If the criteria are clearly spelt out, the fear would be less. Uncertainty is the worst. People want to know what to expect.

Another fear is that the economy of the country will decline and that land is not used productively any more.

What is the interest of the younger generation in farming?

Many German and Afrikaans speaking Namibians have a great talent for farming, and it is a bit unfortunate that they will not have the opportunity to use these talents. But also, as countries develop and become part of the global village, less people of the younger generation will go into farming. There are more and more opportunities outside the farming sector and the world has opened up, both to black and white young people.

In which way are white farmers connected to their land? Is it different from black farmers?

I like to be on the farm, to see the grass grow, to look at the cattle – or the Karakul farmer loves to look at the pelts of his lambs. We are attached to the land in this way, I don't know if this can be called a spiritual connection.

But I also become attached to the land through developing it. Building the land connects me with the land. I have an urge in me to build something and I will always do so, maybe that is a cultural part of our being. Therefore, even when we want to sell our land, the biggest fear is: what will happen to the things that I built? Who will take responsibility for it?

We Afrikaners like to develop land, and what you build on that land you do not like to give away. I can separate myself from the land – but it is difficult for me to leave behind what I have built on it. But today I try to say: take responsibility as long as you are there, but once you leave the land it is someone else's responsibility.

How did you develop such an attitude?

With our Calvinist upbringing we Afrikaners make sure – or should make sure - that we do not get too attached to material goods. The land belongs to God and we just manage it while we are here. We are the stewards of the land and losing it one day should not mean the end of life. Use the land, build it, but do not attach yourself completely to it - I have learned that during my life. I grew up on a farm, and when the farm was sold in 1980 this hurt me very much and I was very sad for many years. I do not want to get into that situation again.

It is very important that we develop an understanding of each others' culture with respect to land, how we feel about land in different ways, and to understand what land means to us emotionally. There are cultural differences and we do not know about this.

“There is a perception that land expropriation is mainly targeting foreigners”

Interview with Ms. Ute König

Deputy Head of Mission, German Embassy in Namibia

(2004-2008)

August 2007

Ms. König, may foreigners buy and own land in Germany?

Yes, there are no constraints or restrictions for foreigners to buy property and land in Germany.

And do you also have policies for land expropriation in Germany?

Yes, it is part of our constitution (Grundgesetz), expropriation can take place in the public interest, just as in the Namibian constitution. Article 14, paragraph 3 of the German constitution says “expropriation is only permissible in the public interest”. It is usually done for the building of roads etc.

How many German citizens own farm land in Namibia?

We do not have our own figures, but the figure announced by the Minister of Lands in the Namibian parliament was 206. Some German citizens might have different forms of ownership like closed corporations or have common ownership with Namibian citizens. We only know about farmers who directly approach us, therefore we do not have any complete lists.

How many of these farms are targeted for expropriation?

As far as I know, for 8 farms the German owners have received an expropriation letter, including those farmers who are involved in current court cases.⁸⁵

In which way does the Investment Protection Treaty protect private farms owned by German citizens?

An investment protection treaty means that the properties of foreigners and of Namibian citizens are treated in the same way; this includes movable and immovable property. In our opinion 'immovable property' includes farms, although we have not yet been provided with a written interpretation of that term from the Namibian side.

The treaty does not protect foreign property from expropriation, but it is based on the principle that foreigners are treated in the same way as inlanders, and that criteria for expropriation are not linked to citizenship. It also applies to tax questions e.g. land tax.

We would like to see more transparency and clarity on the criteria in an expropriation process. At the moment there is a perception, at least among German farm owners, that land expropriation is mainly targeting foreigners.

Seeing that in Namibia the land reform process is still in its beginnings, would you still encourage German citizens to invest in land and in farming in Namibia?

The willingness or readiness to invest in Namibia has decreased, especially in the agricultural sector and in farms. Investments still happen in the tourism sector, investors feel more secure in this area, as this sector is economically growing and is creating a lot of employment.

Can Germany in any way influence the land reform process so that land is returned specifically to Ovaherero or Nama people?

No, we do not have this influence, and we also do not try to influence the process in such a way. We support the land reform process of the Namibian government, including land reform in the communal areas. We supported the work of the Permanent Technical Team of the Ministry of Lands, and we support

⁸⁵ In 2007, German land owners Guenther Kessl and Martin Riedmaier took the Lands Ministry to court, arguing that expropriation orders served on them in 2005 discriminated against foreign investors and had not followed procedure. Kessl owns two farms, and Riedmaier one. The fourth farm was in a trust owned by German citizens. In March 2008, a Namibian court halted the planned seizure of the four farms, saying the government had acted unconstitutionally and that the reference to a 'foreigner' cannot be a criterion for expropriation of the land of a person.

its recommendations. We really make an effort to support the national Namibian reconciliation policy as a whole.

Will the 20 million Euro of the ‘special initiative’ be used in any way to support the return of land to the Ovaherero or Nama people?

The special initiative of Minister Wieczorek-Zeul⁸⁶ is based on the “specific historical responsibility” of Germany towards certain population groups in Namibia. However, the Namibian government has stated very clearly that in a certain region any envisaged projects supported by this initiative will have to be open for all Namibians living in that region.

Does this special initiative target specific regions in Namibia?

Yes, it targets those regions, in which Germany recognizes a specific historical responsibility; it excludes, for example, most of the northern regions. However, the Memorandum of Understanding has not been signed yet. The report of Deputy Prime Minister Libertine Amathila, who visited and consulted with communities in those regions, has been presented to cabinet. Now the tasked consultants will have to complete their report for the National Planning Commission first.

We hope that the Memorandum of Understanding⁸⁷ can be signed before the end of the year. We have created a lot of high expectations and it will be important that the finances for the project implementation will be made available as soon as possible after the signing. It has been a long process.

⁸⁶ German Development Minister Heidemarie Wieczorek-Zeul visited Namibia in 2004 to mark the 100th anniversary of the Herero uprising at Okakarara. In her speech at the event, Wieczorek-Zeul accepted Germany's moral responsibility but repeated the official German position that formal reparations would not be paid. In May 2005, the Minister made a surprise announcement in Mainz, Germany, at a meeting of the German Lutheran Church, that her Government would provide 20 million euros for a 'reconciliation initiative', later dubbed 'special initiative'. (The Namibian, 10 January 2008) The special initiative covers 133 community initiated projects in Karas, Hardap, Erongo, Omaheke, Otjozondjupa and Kunene regions, where Germany acknowledged special historical and moral responsibility.

⁸⁷ In November 2007, Germany and Namibia signed a memorandum of understanding in Germany to have part of the promised 20 million euros (N\$200 million) released through the German Development Bank, Kreditanstalt für Wiederaufbau (KfW).

“Our new government is just doing damage control of what was done during colonialism”

Interview with Dr. Zephania Kameeta

Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Namibia
(ELCRN) (2002-2013)⁸⁸

August 2007

Bishop Kameeta, what does land mean to Namibians?

For an African, land is not just property. Land is part of a people's whole life and it cannot be separated from them. Therefore in the African context it was unheard of to say: I will sell this piece of land to somebody. The whole idea of selling land was taboo, because selling land is like cutting a limb from yourself and throwing it away.

The European understanding of land is completely contrary to the understanding of land in Africa. What we experienced during colonialism - that land could be snatched from people and sold, that people could be removed from the land and divorced from their ancestors – all that was unheard of. Land is not something dead, land is alive. All our ancestors have returned to the ground, they are living in the land. Therefore you will find that people coming to a certain place will kneel and kiss the land.

Is this the same for all groups in Namibia?

Namibians do different things on the land, but this meaning of land you find all over Africa. If you take for example the Oshivambo speaking Namibians: They have been living in the southern and central parts of Namibia for years, but you can clearly see that they do not regard this as their home; they always go back to their land up north. They regard this place here as just a place where they have been brought by circumstances. Almost all important things take place on the land in the north, even a burial will only take place in Windhoek under certain circumstances.

⁸⁸ Between 2015 and 2020, Kameeta was Minister of Poverty Eradication and Social Welfare.

Some people say the Ovaherero are more interested in cattle and not so much in the land itself. Is this true?

No! This is not a typical understanding of land among the Ovaherero, and I am an Otjiherero speaking Namibian too. Ovahereros emphasize the land as the land of their ancestors, and land includes cattle, it includes everything. Just listen to their praise songs: Land of our ancestors, land of our fathers...!

For the Ovaherero the liberation struggle was not about democracy, but about land. The struggle brought democracy and that is fine, but democracy is actually a foreign concept. The main issue is that the land of our ancestors was taken away and should be returned.

So how do they deal with the land reform policy of 'willing buyer-willing seller'?

Most people do not really want land because they want to do farming. They perceive the land as the place where their ancestors lived and therefore want it back. For the Ovahereros it is therefore a huge compromise to accept - as agreed at the National Land Conference in 1991 – that ancestral land would not be returned to those who lived on it 100 years ago.

I understand the government, because today you have very productive farms there that are of great value for the country's economy. However, many Ovahereros do not accept that. They say, the land was stolen, and even if the owner today and the previous owners bought it, the beginning was theft. This is how people understand the land question.

You will also find many people, for instance in the south, who feel that ancestral land should be returned to those people, who were originally chased away from that land. They do not understand that somebody from Hereroland or Ovamboland is resettled on a farm which has been bought in the south. They have accepted the compromise, but only because they do not have a choice.

How can you deal with these feelings?

We have to look at the needs of the country as a whole and cannot act on the basis of tribal understanding. Land reform, as it is currently dealt with by the government and the agricultural bank, makes some people really happy; they are now resettled on an own piece of land. I think the government is trying its best under very difficult circumstances, but land reform is not a solution which will satisfy everybody. What our new government is doing is just damage control of what was done during colonialism, nothing else.

One problem is also that you will find dishonest people in the process, making this damage control even more painful and complicated.

What could white farmers do to make the process less painful?

One should go back to the root cause of the problem. The present generation of white farmers is reaping the fruits of the seeds of their fathers which included the confiscation of land and chasing away its people. Now this generation is saying: We can do nothing about what happened more than 100 ago. But as long as the children of these fathers try to defend and find excuses for what happened 100 years ago, it will be difficult to accept and trust them.

They do not have to reject the people whose name they are carrying. They do not have to hate or despise their ancestors. But maybe they could just have the courage to say: What happened in the past was not right, our parents did bad things and as their children we recognize this and will try to improve on it.

Of course there are black people who are distrustful, who would never forgive and who only see mistakes; but there are also black farmers who see the situation differently and think that white farmers should be part and parcel of present day Namibia. The past is the past, and today we seek cooperation.

In a way the past is a burden for our white brothers and sisters here in the country. But I think their ancestors will smile in their graves, if they could see that their children have realized the mistakes of the past and have decided not to repeat them. They would be happy to see that their sons and daughters are part of the children of this country and build its future hand in hand.

Do you think there is a different attitude towards land between the younger and the older generations?

You have two types of young people in this country: those young people who were born in towns and cities, who went to school in town and who regard an urban centre as their home. They don't have any roots in the rural areas whatsoever. Their first language is English or Afrikaans, and the land of their ancestors is really only an interesting piece of history. Then you also have young people, who grew up in the rural areas, and even when they work in towns, they have their roots in the rural areas. They might be highly educated, but they feel more at home in those areas.

Might land reform become less important with time?

For the generations to come land reform is not going to be an issue any more, and the emotions around land reform will change completely. That is why I said that the

present land reform process is mainly damage control. As far as I can see, land will soon become mainly a commodity which you can use for making money. When my 10-year old grandson talks of the farm, he says: When I grow up, I am going to build a lodge on our farm. So the emotions around living on the land will become something strange, while using land to make money will become more and more interesting.

Is there the perception that whites mainly have land for making money?

White people have been living here for generations and I think they got attached to this land despite what happened in the past. I think they basically have the same feelings for their land as their black brothers and sisters. They also say: This is the land of my ancestors, they were buried there. I recently found a photo in the news paper that showed the disowned farmer of Ongombo West⁸⁹ at the grave of her grandfather. She was sitting there before she had to leave the farm. The pain that this woman was feeling moved me so much, because it is exactly the same pain that Africans felt about the loss of their land.

The problem is that many white farmers don't realize that black people felt the same when their land was taken from them. We actually have so much in common, and I wish we could understand that. Therefore I personally have a problem with confiscating farms. It is part of our constitution and can be done, but the way how it is sometimes done is problematic. The human factor has not been considered at all.

What can you do as a church to address this human factor?

We took the initiative to make a statement as United Church Council of the three Lutheran Churches in Namibia, because expropriation as it is done at present does not create an atmosphere in which all people are feeling part of this country. When we confiscate land, let us take into consideration the feelings of the people. They are citizens of this country and have exactly the same feeling as we would have. They have been living on that land, they buried their beloved ones on that land and they know that those graves will not be taken care of, when other people will settle there.

Faith-based organizations should be actively involved in this issue, because it is not only a material but also a psychological and spiritual issue. We need to initiate discussions, because we all have the same attachment with the land. Let us acknowledge our feelings in this, and the situation might be different.

⁸⁹ Ongombo West was the first farm in Namibia to be expropriated. It belonged to Hilde Wiese, a German Namibian, whose grandfather bought the farm in 1900.

“If land reform is abused for political gain, a catastrophe like in Zimbabwe is inevitable”

Interview with Reverend Schalk Pienaar

Moderator of the Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC)
in Namibia
July 2007

The DRC has 24 000 members in Namibia, mostly Afrikaans-speaking people, and 3 San congregations near Tsumkwe, Mangetti Dunes and Tsumeb.

Reverend Pienaar, how do farmers of your church feel about land reform?

On the one hand there are the very negative feelings that we will go the same way as Zimbabwe. On the other hand we have people who are positive and who are involved in the training of new black farmers; there are both ends. People living in towns like Windhoek and who are not involved in farming may not be thinking so much about land reform, but people on the farms show these two extremes.

Does age have to do with these different attitudes?

No, age does not matter. I know old people who are very positive and young people who are very negative. It rather differs from region to region. In the south people are less worried, but people in the east and north east are fearful to be targeted for expropriation. A lot of white farmers have been on their farms for generations and they built them up from scratch. When they see how farms are going backwards, not all, but a lot of them, they have this fear that what they built up through generations will go down the drain.

As a church how are you dealing with it?

We work with the Namibia Agricultural Union and also directly with our church members. The church has a pastoral responsibility towards those congregation members who experience the land issue as a crisis - not only to care for them but also to lead them. We want our people to know that we as a church are not opposed to land reform. But we ask that there will be a couple of things taken into consideration during this process.

The church should also answer to the task of pointing out that God lends the earth to mankind, and that land must be employed responsibly and with great discernment.

The Dutch Reformed Church has a long history as the 'apartheid church'. How is it seen by government and the black community today?

I think through the grace of God it is accepted today. In the first place, in the ecumenical area we are accepted completely by all Council of Churches (CCN) members. I think my election as president communicated that. I never felt that I was not welcome or that I was 'that white guy' to whom they would not listen.

In 2003, I officially told the government that we were sorry for the fact that we were part of apartheid, and the government was extremely positive about this. Since then I have paid a couple of visits to the previous Prime Minister Hage Geingob, Prime Minister Nahas Angula and also to the President, and the President also visited some of our services during the last few years. So I think the perception of our church changed completely.

At one of the conferences that the CCN organized in 2005, our president said he wants to thank our church as one of the churches that is contributing to the country. And I did my best to break down the walls between us and other churches and also between us and black people.

Do you think there is a difference between Afrikaans and German farmers in the way they are connected to the land?

I think it is the same way. Of course most Afrikaners have the typical Calvinist world view, which says that the land is not ours, it belongs to God, and we are just stewards of the land - Calvinist stewards. We believe that we must do everything for God and not for ourselves. That might mean that it makes people less attached to the land. But I know that a lot - a lot! - of Afrikaans speaking people are very attached to their farms.

I think that the new generation of white Afrikaaner farmers will not be as strong on that. It will be easier for some of them to start something new; they have a lot of opportunities.

Which should be the aim of land reform?

Land reform is very much a political issue, but it should not be something which people use to get political points. If you distribute land it must be based on a healthy economic foundation, and I find it heartening that organized agriculture is implementing deliberate attempts to launch various projects so support emerging black farmers.

Farming is not an easy industry sprouting naturally, it demands technical knowledge and skills, efficient management, infrastructure and capital. Various factors make it increasingly difficult to make it an economic success – and today there are almost no Western countries in which the agricultural sector represents more than 10% of the population. Industry surpassed agriculture as the generator of wealth already more than 200 years ago. In southern Africa, a century ago 90% of Afrikaners were involved in agriculture, but this has dwindled to less than 10 %.

The country as a whole must benefit from land reform, not only individuals. If you take the best farming land and give it to people who do not use it to its full potential, it is bad for the country. But I also agree that it is not fair that one person has 200,000 hectares and others do not have any land, it is just not fair.

What would you like the government to do?

A couple of things: Land reform must be a transparent process so that everyone knows where it is heading. It goes without saying that the whole process must follow the dictates of acknowledged legal principles and that there be constant vigilance against corruption and nepotism. If land reform is abused for political gain, a catastrophe like in Zimbabwe is inevitable.

Secondly, land reform must be handled with sensitivity, because land ownership and land loss are very emotional issues.

The government must be supported in its present policy of approaching land reform responsibly and realistically. Simply distributing as much land as possible to as many as possible, as is demanded sometimes, will create more problems than it will solve. The idea that redistribution of land will result in prosperity or alleviate poverty significantly has been proved a myth. All over the world only the most efficient and dedicated farmers can survive.

Land reform must form part of an encompassing development programme. The solution is not to be found in distributing thousands of patches of land haphazardly. There is an urgent need for effective training courses and development programmes for new black farmers. One possibility might be to draw upon retired experts.

Land reform must also consider ecological factors as some rural areas present an ecological crisis due to overpopulation, overgrazing, soil erosion – these result in huge losses of agricultural soil. Awareness must be fostered in the spirit of the phrase: We inherited the land from our fathers, but borrow it from our children!

What can white people do?

The situation in our country demands that white people cannot simply acknowledge that racial discrimination was exercised with respect to land ownership. The injustices of the past must be addressed. Unfortunately various factors contributed towards instilling a negative attitude towards land reform among many whites. Those whose land is involved feel extremely threatened and insecure. The series of farm murders in South Africa and the manner of their execution as well as the seizing of land in Zimbabwe and the possibility of repetition in Namibia aggravate the negativity.

Also the prices for farms should remain market related, but prices have become impossible, you cannot farm economically on a farm that costs you that much.

Ideas or suggestions coming from the white side are often not seen to be honest or genuine.

I think one of the things that can help is better communication with each other, not speaking only in our own circles, but to talk across borders with each other. The church can assume a reconciliatory role as a mediator in local communities. And the second thing: We must do what we say, we must not say something and do something else; we must be reliable.

“Farming is good, but we need a lot of money in order to be productive”

Interview with Andreas Amushila

Affirmative Action farmer on farm Hafelberg, Grootfontein
October 2007

Mr. Amushila, what previous experience of farming do you have?

As a boy I often worked as a farm labourer on farms near Windhoek. I also had agriculture as a subject at school. In 1992 I bought a plot of 480 hectares near Otavi. This was problematic because after some time, my herd of cattle increased from 15 to 180, so I had to hire grazing in other areas. I was a part-time cattle farmer, and I also produced maize and sorghum.

When did you buy this farm?

I bought this farm a few years ago, through an agent. I took a loan from Agribank through the Affirmative Action Loan Scheme. The farm is good, and there is enough land. I am now a full-time farmer. I have 400 head of cattle and good registered bulls as well as goats and sheep.

Why did you want to buy and own a farm?

When I retired I still had energy and was in good health, I therefore wanted to keep myself busy and produce something for the country. I also want to teach the younger people to work hard and to contribute to the economy of the country.

What do you like about farming?

When I look at my animals I feel very proud that I have produced something. Farming is also a way to become independent – not to be employed, but to become an employer and thus reduce unemployment.

How many employees do you have?

I have six full-time workers who have houses on the farm, plus a number of casual workers.

How do you get on with your employees?

As a fulltime farmer you must be an employer plus a trainer. It is important to plan and discuss matters together, and to indicate what is to be achieved. The employees must know and understand your strategies for making the farm productive, such as, for example, cattle rotation. Also give them a chance to air their views! And use the experience of your farm workers who know the area and the cattle.

As a farm owner you must be involved in getting people to work, but you must work together in a democratic way. At meetings we write minutes and type the results, and then everybody gets a copy and signs it. The minutes are explained to the farm workers and translated, if necessary. I make sure that they understand everything so that, when I am not here, they know what to do and that their work is something we have agreed upon. They know what they are paid for and what is expected from them.

You also have to give your employees incentives like a bonus, on top of an annual increase - or you could shoot a kudu for them as a reward for a good job.

How are relations with your neighbours?

Our neighbourly relations are very good. The local Meteorit Farmers Association is very active, and often offers training for farmers. There is also a group sponsored by the European Union that helps us with training.

But we also help each other. Last week, for example, one of my bulls jumped into Mr. Schneider's farm, and they immediately phoned to inform me. What is also putting us closer together is the selling of bulls; we sell them among each other for slightly lower prices. All farmers in this area are interested to produce good quality cattle.

Why is land reform such an emotional issue?

It is emotional, because everyone wants a piece of land, but the land has been in the hand of white farmers. Therefore the government says: Because we cannot create land, we have to take farms from some white farmers. We know that some white farmers are willing to give land, but the farms that are sold to the government are not enough. This means that not everyone who wants a farm gets a farm. And this gets emotional, because some people get farms and other people don't.

In addition, very few black people can afford to buy a farm because of the past. Until independence, we black people were treated as second class citizens with very low salaries, and that affected us very much. While white people were able to save and provide for their children, paying in money during their childhood, black people did not have this chance.

What do you say about expropriation?

Expropriation is also a very emotional issue. People who are trying to produce on a piece of land to earn a living are going to be punished by land grabs. Expropriation must be done in a peaceful way, otherwise it will create hatred, and that hate will not die. This is why the Herero people still talk about von Trotha and what happened 100 years ago. If something like expropriation is treated in a peaceful way, people will forget and forgive.

You said many black people do not have enough money to buy farms. What about resettlement farms that are allocated to people by the government?

Many people also complain about resettlement farms. The land is given to people, but people are not trained as farmers. It is as if a person is given a car, but is not taught to drive. People therefore are destroying the land instead of producing on it economically, and some farms really go down. But if you get a farm, you have to start where the other (the previous owner) has ended, go from there, and improve.

I met quite a lot of resettlement people who are very happy on their piece of land, even if they have remained rather poor.

You are right, it keeps people happy, but I don't like the idea of people sitting on farms and being idle. Many people are used to being dependent and therefore continue to depend on the government. But I am happy if a person is doing something. Those who lack skills must be assisted, but they must not just sit around while fences and pumps are breaking. There needs to be planning and development – this is what we would like to see in Namibia. But I know that it is very difficult to move from our traditional way of farming to modern ways of production. You cannot expect a person who is resettled to suddenly work and produce like a white commercial farmer.

Is it true that most Affirmative Action farmers are also not very successful? What are their biggest problems?

Farming is something good, but you need a lot of money in order to be a productive farmer. Farming is not only about having land, you also need animals and capital.

And if you have money, you must use it correctly. When you get a loan from Agribank, it is not easy to pay the money back. But over a period of 22 years you should be able to sell enough cattle and pay back your loan. You could even try to reduce payments to a shorter period.

When you decide to buy a farm, you must have full knowledge of the advantages and disadvantages of your land and of farming. Some people just buy a farm for the sake of having a farm and do not make sure that the farm is of good quality, and this very soon puts them into a problem.

In Namibia, we also have this tendency of blaming. I see that some people do not use their money or their loans correctly. They buy farms with loans, but the first thing they do is buy expensive diesel cars on hire purchase and then have difficulties paying back their loans. When the car is confiscated by the bank, he or she blames Agribank.

After independence the government promised to return at least part of the land to the black people. At the same time, it seems that people are not well prepared to be good farmers in commercial areas?

We also have to blame our politicians. They want to be praised and use land reform for their election campaigns, promising a lot of things. Surely we want farms, but we also want the land to be productive, so there is a conflict between the political and the economic aims of land reform.

It would make things better if politicians would tell people the truth: Rome was not built in one year. Training for prospective farmers is important. If we want the land to be productive, land reform needs to go slowly.

Do you think that in Namibia there is a basic difference between black and white farmers and their connection to land?

Yes, there is, but this is mainly because of our past. In the old political system black people were not respected as fellow human beings. They were denied a good education, and they were left behind due to that. This created animosity among people, and these things are still in some people's mind. For example, all white people are still seen as having a lot of money.

Today we are moving away from old traditions and old politics. Most white farmers around here are very friendly and helpful. I can ask them for assistance, and they give me advice freely, but if they give me material things, I pay them.

They give us, for example, special prices for bulls that we want to buy. They do this not only to earn money, but to ensure that in our area everybody produces cattle of good quality, so that, when we take our cattle to the market, there is no difference between black and white farmers. We all have one aim, and that is farming - and we need to work together as a team.

What about some people's traditional attitude towards cattle – that it is a status symbol?

That is what you find with black people: As long as they have a lot of cattle, it increases their status. If an ox becomes old and loses weight, they are still proud of it. For the Ovambos it is 'cattle and corn' - as long as you have lots of that, you are a rich person. A money economy is still something new, and it is very difficult to move from the old to the modern tradition.

Should the African traditions of production simply be given up?

The old traditions will die out. You cannot go to town to buy things with cattle. What you need is money. The new generation will not have a problem with this.

Is the younger generation also as 'land hungry' as those who were part of the war of liberation?

The younger generation is not very interested in farming and in hard work, so the land hunger will decrease. Our young people do not want to struggle or dirty their hands and prefer white collar jobs. They want to have nice cars and houses. This is the same among blacks and whites. They do not want farms, they want good jobs. Maybe, if the land hunger decreases, only those people who are really interested in farming will buy farms and use them economically, while at the moment only very few people on farms are really productive.

“I paid the government for this farm, and this feels good”

Interview with Thekla Kahiru

Affirmative Action farmer on farm Kayas, Grootfontein

October 2007

While I was staying on the guest farm Kalkfontein, 15 km outside Grootfontein, I asked the ladies in the kitchen if they knew of any Affirmative Action farmers nearby. They gave me the names and addresses of a number of farmers, most of whom I did not find at home. Among others they directed me to farm Kayas, in the direction of Abenab.

I travelled on a gravel road through an extremely grey landscape, with thick bush on both sides of the road. After 50 km I found a small board ‘Kayas’ and turned off onto a narrow farm path. After some time I passed a few barefoot women and children, carrying bags on their heads. Later I heard that they are San people who live on Kayas, in tiny corrugated iron huts; they are not employed, merely tolerated and not chased away, because they have no other place to stay. They live from gathering marula nuts; they cut out the pits, and out of one pit they squeeze not more than half a drop of oil.

Ten kilometres further on, I approached the farmstead. I left the car outside the yard under a dry tree and walked towards the house. A woman and a small boy met me halfway and greeted me. She was Mrs. Thekla Kahiru. Her husband was not at home, he worked in Otjiwarongo as a builder, she told me, and the little boy at her side was her daughter’s child, who worked in Windhoek.

I explained why I had come to see her, and she offered to sit and talk inside the house. She told me that she and her husband Mattheus Kahiru are the owners of the farm. The farm was bought in 1997 through Agribank and the Affirmative Action Loan Scheme, and it is about 5 000 ha large. They farm with cattle and sheep. She was hesitant to give exact figures, maybe 200 cattle and about 90 goats and 78 sheep...

Mrs. Kahiru, where did you stay before you bought this farm?

We stayed in Otjituo, in the communal area. Later, in 1985, we rented a farm near Outjo, from a non-white farmer. At that time there were already some black farmers in that area.

Why did you buy this farm?

We had about 50 cattle, but the numbers slowly increased and there was not enough space. So, in 1989, we moved to this farm, but we only rented it from the government, it was a government farm. We rented it until we could buy it from the government through Agribank.

You have been here now for ten years – how did it go?

It is dry here, but this farm is okay. The land is now enough, because we do not increase our herds but keep the numbers the same. And by giving the cattle lick, they remain strong. We know that if we do not give them lick, the animals get weak.

The number of cattle increases all the time, but because we live off the sale of cattle, we sell them and use the money for the children and their school fees, and we pay for whatever we need with our cattle.

How many people stay on this farm?

There are me, my husband and his two brothers, and two other young men. The two brothers help out on the farm with the cattle and goats. There are also farm workers, one in the house, one for the cattle, one for the goats and sheep, and I also have people who do contract work – they repair fences etc.

I myself work in the garden; I want to sell some vegetables in Rundu or Grootfontein. We have only started, and we have to try things out.

Also on the farm live about 30 Bushmen, they do not have work, and they are not part of our family. I somehow feel responsible for them, they came here, because they have no other place to stay and found refuge on this farm. I want to help them. Sometimes they do work, they cut wood and bushes and make charcoal, they also gather marula fruit and squeeze out the oil, and sometimes they get some milk, when they help to milk the cows.

We let them live here, we do not chase them away. We also care about them, so maybe if you have second-hand clothing you can send them here for them. We have a social responsibility.

Are you happy on this farm?

What can I say? I live in our own place. If you have your own house, you are happy. Only if it is dry, and if the cattle are suffering, we are a bit unhappy.

First you were in the communal area, then you rented a farm, now you have your own farm. What is the difference?

If you have your own thing, you are happy. If it is not your own, it is not good. I paid the government for this farm, and this feels good. My husband is also happy to have his own farm; he is on his own now, while before that he was dependent on somebody else.

Our children are also interested in farming. They are still at school, but they come during weekends and during holidays, and then they help out and learn.

Who are your neighbours?

On one side is another Affirmative Action farmer, an Oshiwambo speaking man, Mr Nakale. On the other side are resettlement people, they are Herero people, and on the other side are Bushmen. And on that side is Mr. Stump, he is in Germany, he does not live here. Most other Affirmative Action farmers though are not around; they do not stay fulltime on their farms.

Yes, we work together; not so much with the San people, they are just like that and keep to themselves, but with the others, yes, we do work together.

What is your biggest problem on this farm?

We do not have power, only our own generators, and this is so expensive. But joining Nampower is even more expensive - the installation and the monthly costs. We are now thinking about solar systems, also for pumping water for the garden. We know in the beginning it is expensive, but later on not so much.

Where did you learn farming?

In the communal area you are born amidst the cattle, and as you grow up you just see cattle and goats. And also when you go to school, you help to look after the cattle and goats during the holidays. That is how you learn about animals.

Any plans for the future?

We have kudu here, and we would like the game to increase. So maybe we will open some camps by removing some fences, so that they can move more freely and increase.

“We do not regret a thing”

Interview with Rachel Cinana

Resettlement farmer at Kleinfontein, Maltahöhe

October 2007

Mrs. Cinana, who is the owner of this farm?

I am the owner of the farm. Before us, Kleinfontein belonged to a Namibian-German family. The government bought it after independence. They divided it up into four parts and gave it away for resettlement. My husband and I applied for resettlement at the Ministry of Lands and Resettlement in Mariental, in 2000. We were lucky, we received 2 048 hectares and also this house. I was so happy that this farm was entrusted to us. I can now move and live freely.

Where did you live before?

I worked as a farm labourer on a commercial farm.

Why did you leave a secure job to live here?

I was glad I had that job, but I was not able to plan my life. I was dependent, and I was never sure what would happen to me and my children once I would be too old to work. I wanted a safe place to stay for the rest of my life.

What are your main problems?

The drought. And the lack of water. On one cattle post the water is not working and nobody is repairing the pump. The government said they would support us with maintenance and repairs, but nobody is coming.

And how has life improved here?

We are still poor, but we have a beautiful house and we take good care of the land that was entrusted to us. We can send our grandchildren to school and we can feed

ourselves. And we have responsibility. Our farming has even progressed a little. When we moved here, we only had 50 animals and now we have 130 goats.

We still have dreams, we want to grow vegetables and fruit and sell it in Maltahöhe. We have started doing that already, and we have planted seed for the next season. And I am looking forward to December. That is the time, when I can market the fruits and vegetables - water melons, sweet potatoes and beet root.

And the whole family will come from near and far to celebrate Christmas together with us, at this place which is our own. We are living peacefully, and our farming has progressed. We do not regret anything.

“Here I am happy and free”

Interview Mrs. Maria Witbooi

Resettlement farmer on farm Halifax, Maltahöhe

October 2007

Mrs. Witbooi, who is living on this farm and who owns it?

I am the owner of this farm. And I live here with my family and their children.

Where did you live before?

Before 1996 I lived in the communal land further south. I was a farmer there as well, I owned about 50 goats. I know what goats and sheep need, and I know how to treat them.

Why did you move away?

On the communal land farming was difficult. There were no camps, and I had to run after my sheep all the time. When I got older I could not do that anymore. Therefore I wanted a resettlement farm so that I could have small camps and have better control over my animals.

I also did not like the crowded conditions in the communal area. We were sitting on top of each other, there was no space. And this created many social and economic problems. People were fighting.

Are you happy here?

Yes, very happy. In the homeland I was not happy. But here I am free, here we have space.

I now have my own place and my herd has increased to 75 sheep and 70 goats. They run in four different camps. My children and grandchildren help me with the more difficult tasks, and there is enough space for them to stay with me.

I am very content here. Here I am responsible for my life. I am on my own, and most of my problems have been solved.

What are your main problems?

I have started to sell some animals because of the drought. I want to sell them while they are still strong.

Another problem is that my cattle post is the only place with water on Halifax. The boreholes of the other three resettlement sections have collapsed and all animals are driven to my water point to drink.

I want my neighbours to solve this problem, but I also understand. They need assistance to repair the boreholes. Until that time we share the water, it's okay.

Do you have any wishes for the future?

No, no more wishes.

“Our aim is farming – it is just that we need more land”

Interview with Ronald Kazaruia

Grandson of the owners of Resettlement farm Nevada,
Otjiwarongo
October 2007

I drive out of Otjiwarongo in the direction of Otavi. Thirty kilometres further on I see a board, showing me the way to Farm Nevada. I turn off, and after about ten minutes on a small sand path I notice clouds of brown dust, created by a small herd of cattle in a kraal. I also make out a few goats, a few huts and a big yard.

When I park my car outside the yard, a young man runs up the car to greet me, then a very old man comes out of one hut, and a little later, an old Ovaherero woman from another. When she recognizes me as a white person, she points to her light brown skin: “German blood.” Her grandfather was German, she tells me.

Their son Rodney - their only son “and responsible for everything” - is not around; he is in Otjiwarongo for work. Their grandson Ronald, a tall and strong young man clad in a khaki overall has in the meantime left the cattle kraal and is approaching us. He speaks English fluently.

A few plastic chairs are fetched from inside the huts and I am invited to sit on one of them under a tree, while the grandmother prefers to sit on the floor in the sand - that is where she is comfortable, she says. I explain why I came, but the grandmother is wary. Her son “who is responsible for everything here”, is not there, and she wants to know exactly who I am.

I explain my intentions in great detail, stressing that I am not from the government and that I am not reporting back to the government. After Rodney has translated everything into Otjiherero I am free to record the conversation and to take photos.

I learn that the resettlement farm Nevada is registered in the name of the grandfather. The family received the farm in 1993 or 1994, nobody is quite sure. Before, they lived and worked as farm workers near the Waterberg, on farm Braunfels. One day, they recount, they were evicted from the farm. For nine months they camped along the road, grazing their animals in the road camps until they were finally resettled on Nevada by the government. They have lived here now for the past 14 years. Today they regard Nevada as their 'family farm', because the whole family, about 24 people, is staying here.

You have lived in other places before. Is your life here better now?

We came here with 22 cattle and 18 goats and during the past 14 years we developed to having 124 goats and 152 cattle. We earn money from our farming business by selling cattle. But we are also forced to sell cattle because the land is very small and we do not want to overgraze.

When there is rain, we also plant maize. We harvest our own food and then do not have to buy so much food.

We are satisfied, but the place is small, we have 1 800 hectares and only three camps. We would like to have more camps.

What is your biggest problem?

It is mainly the size. Our aim is farming. We want to develop and increase our herds. It is just that we need more land.

But we also do not have enough water. We share the water with other people, and often the dam doesn't get full, and it is also damaged. But we are ourselves responsible for the water – it is just up to us to repair it. We do not get help from the Ministry; we are doing everything ourselves.

How is the cooperation with the other families?

It is okay, we cooperate well with each other; for example, we help each other to prevent stock theft. But most of our neighbours don't know much about farming. Their cattle look much different from ours. We feed ours and provide them with lick. We also bought a bull for 48 000 N\$ - we were able to save money by selling cattle.

Are you feeling content here?

Grandmother: I have that fear to be sent away again, because I am thinking back of that other story, when we were thrown out of that farm. But we are feeling okay, even though we have that fear. I don't know what they are discussing there in government, we really don't know.

Ronald, as a young person and the grandson, would you also like to manage a Resettlement farm like this?

I would love to live here, but I would like to buy the farm, so that I know it is my own. I would also love to get more land, by all means.

I love farming. I love sitting around my animals and give them love just as to my babies. I talk to my cattle – look, there is my bull, I call him Eddie. - Farming is my dream! *(He calls out to the bull and the bull turns his head towards him.)*

Do you agree that many Resettlement farms are not really a success?

It depends on where the farms are situated and how the people are farming. Some farmers just think: Okay we want that land but we do nothing. I can see that our neighbours do not know how to manage their cattle, they do not know much about farming. They have 4 or 5 camps, more land than we have, but our cattle look fat and theirs don't, because we are feeding them and we are giving them lick. If you look at the camps you also see the difference. Our camps look much better.

Where did you learn about farming?

I grew up with my grandparents, who are farmers. I also did a course on agriculture in Grootfontein for six months. This was my own decision; it just did it for my own information. It is my dream to study further in the field of agriculture and then really farm well. To get a bigger farm is every day's prayer.

“We would like a farm of our own; this place belongs to the government”

Interview with Mr. and Mrs. Vries

Resettlement farmers on Nautabis-Sonderwater, Dordabis
October 2007

Mr. and Mrs. Vries, since when have you lived on this farm?

We came here in 2003. We first farmed in the communal area in the Rehoboth district. Then we applied for resettlement in Windhoek, and it took about a year before it was approved. Since then we have spent 80 000 N\$ from our own pocket to get the farm in order - the kraals, the wind pumps and pipes, and buying animals.

Where did this money come from?

I (Mr. Vries) worked for many years and saved money. I was also paid out after I had worked for 33 years with the same company.

Why did you apply for resettlement, when you were able to farm in the communal area?

In the communal area we could not live. Our animals got stolen in the reserve all the time. We were not able to come up (develop). We saw other people who had their own place and they were living well. So we applied.

Where did you learn farming?

I (Mrs. Vries) was born in 1950 and grew up in the Sandveld in the Omaheke. I went to school in Waldfrieden and later became a nurse in the Katutura hospital. In 2001 I decided to leave the family in town and start farming in the 'Baster Reserve' (communal area) near Dordabis. I started with a garden, some cattle and some

goats. - Where I am, there must be garden! That is how I am. - And I worked myself to death, but working yourself to death is all right. I learned a lot.

You came here five years ago. Has life improved since then?

In the beginning we lost animals because of different plants here that our animals could not eat. Our neighbours, also resettlement people, gave us information, but it did not help so much. Then Mr. Kraft (a white commercial farmer in the neighbourhood) - he is the father here of everyone - came to us and wrote down a few things to try out, and in this way we progressed.

Now, when it rains, we sell milk and butter, and from that money we buy salt and lick and medicine and fodder for our animals. Our pension money we just spend on petrol, 370 N\$ is just enough for petrol.

Life here is much better than in the reserves. We see our animals growing; we have control over our animals. Here, there is no stealing - only the jackals are stealing! Everything is camped and safe. In the communal area there was just one huge camp, here we have 7 camps.

What are your main problems?

We have two problems here. Life would be much better if we had enough water. The only bank account we have is our cattle, and if there is no rain, our cattle will die or we will have to sell them. But selling animals is difficult, because we do not have a lorry to transport cattle to the auctions. So we only sell our animals off the farm to the white farmers around here, but of course then we do not get the full price.

We are still at a low level of farming. If we improve and come to a middle level, maybe we can hire a lorry and bring our animals to the auctions in Rehoboth.

The other problem is that the farm is too small. There was a time when we had 700 goats, but that was too much and we reduced the number. Now we have 445 goats and almost 200 cattle plus calves.

Did you receive any help from the government?

Yes. The dam was leaking and the government came to seal it. They also helped us with new pipes and a cylinder, a tank, and an engine for water pumping. Just the generator we had to buy ourselves. They remained quiet about this.

But we are satisfied with the government, they did not lie back, they helped us. The extension service people from the Ministry of Agriculture come here a lot, we know them all.

We heard that you are part of a local committee that nominates people for resettlement from a long list. How do you decide who should get a resettlement farm?

We look at the need. We look, for example, at people who do not have work. Then we see if they have a few goats. Before, applicants did not need to have any animals to qualify for resettlement, but today they need to have some.

The problem is that most people on the resettlement farms do not know how to farm. Me and my wife we had animals, we had money and we had experience.

We also know that some resettlement farmers are not successful and have rented out their land back to white farmers. This is not what resettlement farms are for. But we understand. If, for example, you do not have enough money to repair your water pipes or dams, and if then somebody comes and offers to help you in return for grazing, of course you take that help. Those people had no water, very few goats, and they were not able to pay their farm workers anything. Now they have something. The white farmer repaired their water and gives them some money - and now even the farm workers get something.

What advice would you give to resettlement farmers?

I would say that people must not sit with folded hands, they must look for help. You must stand up and do something. Don't wait for the government. Stand up and sweat!

Do you love this farm?

Yes, it is near Windhoek and we have improved it a lot. But we would like to get a bigger farm later on. And we would like a farm of our own. This place belongs to the government. They gave it to us for 99 years, but it is not our place, we just use it and must look after it. We did not buy it with our money; we just have a contract, a lease agreement for 1578 ha. Maybe if we work hard, we can buy a bigger farm. But we are not sure if it is possible.

“I have good work, but I do not have a home”

Interview with David Kheiseb

Farm worker on farm Okariro in Khomas Hochland

October 2007 on farm Okariro

David Kheiseb, 30, grew up in the south of Namibia on a farm, owned by a white farmer. After finishing grade 8, he worked on this farm as a farm worker and hunting guide. In 1999, he had to leave the farm, and his home since birth, because the farm was sold.

A year later, he found work on Farm Okariro in the Khomas Hochland, where he is now living together with his wife and three children and working as a farm foreman. He receives a monthly salary plus meat, and free electricity and water. He has a 2-bedroom house, TV and radio. He is entrusted to drive the farm cars, and he may also drive them for private use.

David, how is life on this farm?

I am happy here. My employers are very good to me. If there is a lot of work, they do not put too much pressure on me, but they come out on the weekend, and we all work together.

I do not want to live in town, it is expensive and difficult. After I left the farm in the south, I tried to do so (live in town) for a year, but I could not adapt. When so many people live on top of each other, there is jealousy and there are fights, and you are unhappy. This life here is much better.

Would you like to have your own piece of land one day?

I would love to have my own farm - not so much for myself, but for my father. He wanted to buy a farm with the help of Agribank. He had enough goats and sheep to qualify for an Agribank loan, but because he cannot read and write his brother-in-law and others cheated on him. Every month my father gave some money to them, but unfortunately he never asked for a receipt. He thought the money was paid

to the bank, but only half was paid and the rest disappeared. And then the others signed the forms for the sale of the farm without my father, and now the farm is not in his name.

Would you also be interested in having your own farm?

If I could get a resettlement farm of about 2,000 hectares, and if I could farm alone on it and would not have to share it with other families, it would be fine. But if the government resettles you on a farm together with 3 or 4 different parties or families, and if you then have to share the water point, you have a problem, because who will feel responsible for the maintenance of the water pipes and the pump etc.? Maybe you are the only one who cares about it, and the others just sit there – and you cannot push them out.

But yes, I would love to have my own farm. If I could choose, I would like to farm in the southern area, which I know well. I would farm with goats and sheep. But I have not yet applied, I will first stay here. Maybe I apply later, when I am older, I would really love to do so.

The owners of this farm are white – so aren't you afraid that this farm could one day be expropriated?

Yes, there was talk about three farms around here that would be taken away by government, including this farm. That was a few years ago. So I don't know what will happen.

What will you do if it happens?

I don't know. What can I say? My farmers said that if the government takes away their farm, they will fight for us farm workers that we can stay. Otherwise I will go to my father's farm and help him there.

You grew up on a farm in the south. It was sold seven years ago, and you had to leave the farm when the new owner moved in. Did you ever return there?

In the beginning, when I came to this farm, the thoughts and feelings about my old farm never left me, they were there day and night. When I talked, I just talked about it, my thoughts always walked in that direction.

So two weeks ago, when I was at a funeral at the village near that farm, I thought, why don't I quickly drive to the farm? I suddenly felt, no matter what the new owner says or thinks, I have to go there, to just look at it – not at the new things or the changed things, but at the places where we stayed, where my Ouma stayed, at everything that was there, when I was still living there.

And how was this visit for you?

Going back to my home farm was a strange feeling. The new owner is so inhuman and unfriendly. He saw me and shouted, "What are you looking for?" I really felt bad, how can he ask me something like that? I did not want to take anything away from him, I just wanted to look at the graves.

But after I went there, and when I returned, I felt much better. If the new owner would just allow me to go there and look at these things, maybe once a year, I would feel much better. It hurts very much if he keeps me away from that farm, as if I do not have anything to see there.

So what did you do when you went to the farm?

I first visited Stefan, my cousin, who is still working there. As I was sitting at his house the sun began to set fast, so I knew it was time to drive back. But then I thought, no, I must at least pass by the grave yard, and I asked my wife and children: Don't you want to come with me?

We quickly asked for a bottle, and we filled it with water, so that Ouma can have water on the other side.⁹⁰ And with the last light I arrived with my wife and the little ones at the graveyard. And when we found my grandmother's grave, we gave water to her, and we talked a little with her, and the little ones threw some sand on the grave to also bury their grandmother, and then we returned.

And when I drove back in the evening I felt so light. I felt so much better. And I now want to save money for a grave stone for my grandmother's grave. Then I will inform the other people from our farm (who also had to leave when the farm was sold) that there will be a gravestone ceremony. I will let them know over the radio, and we can all come together. I just hope the new owner will allow it.

I hope you can carry out that plan. And I am happy you have a good life here.

Yes, I have a good life. I have good work, but I do not have a home. My home is down south. This is where I belong and I want to go back there one day.

⁹⁰ A custom of Nama/Damara people: providing dead people with water so that they won't be thirsty 'on the other side'

“Farm workers could perhaps get a little piece of land ...”

Interview with Selma Tiboth⁹¹

Farm worker, October 2007

Mrs. Tiboth, since when have you lived on this farm?

I was born here, I am a farm child. My mother was also born here and she worked here until she was too old to work; she now lives in Windhoek. My grandmother was also born here. And all my children were born here too.

What kind of work do you do?

I have done house work on this farm for 25 years. I also have my own animals, I have six cattle.

Your children and the farm owners' children have grown up on this farm together. Is there a difference between how they feel about this land?

Yes, there is a huge difference. My children know from the beginning that I, their mother, am just here to work. The owner's children, when they are finished with school, they leave this farm and study in other countries, but one day they return to this farm and they know this is their place. They know this is their parents' farm, but my children they cannot say that because I am just a worker, it is not my place. The owners' children know: this is my home. They know that and they are happy. But my children know, when they grow up, they have to leave this place.

Would you like to have your own piece of land one day?

Yes, very much. Here I work for other people, for my employers, and the problem with which I sit is: What will happen one day when I am old, or what will happen to my children if I die? I do not have a place to stay.

⁹¹ Name changed at the request of the farm worker

If I die, what must my children do with my cattle? They will have to sell them. And where will my children live? This is not my place, and if I die, my children must leave this farm, while the white man's children (the owner's children) can stay here and take over when their parents die.

Or one day I will be old and then I cannot live any longer on this farm. In order to manage and build the farm, the farmer needs young people, and then the old people have to go. Therefore I want a farm; so that when one day I am old I can stay there. Of course then my children must be there to help me, because I cannot do it on my own.

Are you really afraid that your employers will send you away when you get old?

As I said, I know old people like my mother, who used to work here, but who are not here any more. When I cannot work anymore, someone else must do my work and move into my house - and I am afraid of that.

Another problem is: If our children have grown up, they may usually not live with their parents on the farm any more. They may only visit them. They have to live somewhere else and look for work. So they go to town and move in with other people. And then they do not find work. It is very difficult to find work, we all know that. And because they do not have work, they start moving around.

And it worries me that I cannot have these children near me to have an eye on them, so that they do not do bad things. Maybe they take drugs or they go into crime. I just have no control over them, because they are not allowed to stay with me. I do not know what my children are doing. One day you just get a phone call and are told your child is in prison or has taken drugs.

For us farm workers this is very difficult. I am just a worker on a farm, but the farm is not my home.

Have you applied for a resettlement farm?

No. We do not know how it works. I heard about it, and I think it is a good thing, if the government takes the farm of a white man and gives it to black people. But how must I apply?

I have heard about it (resettlement) – that it has good and bad sides. I see many people who do not know how to farm. They take over farms from a white farmer, but they do not know how to manage it and they cannot build the farm further.

And I also know: The government will not give farms to poor people like us. They will ask us: How rich are you? What do you know, can you speak English? We farm workers do not have a chance to get a resettlement farm.

What would you like the government to do for farm workers?

I really wish the government would help us with a little piece of land to have a safe place to live when we get old. I heard that the government and the president did something for people in towns who are not very rich. They sell them small cheap plots where they can build a small house, just a small one.

So maybe the government can also give us, who work on farms for other people, a very small piece of land which we can buy cheaply, so that we do not have to go to Windhoek, where it is full and where there are lots of problems, where the water is expensive and where we have no place to stay.

Then I know this is my place and we can build a small house and have some chicken - a place, where we can live when we are finished with work, when we are 65. We do not have to get a whole farm, only a small piece, so when we are out of work, we can sit on a place of our own.

Are you afraid that this farm might be expropriated?

We hear in the radio that the government takes farms from white people and then they will be divided or sold. And we see that some white people have 3 or 4 farms and that is not right. They have to give one or two farms to the government.

What will happen when white farms change into black ownership?

There is a difference between when a black farmer has a farm or a white farmer has a farm – these are two different things. If a black farmer gets a farm, he employs people to look after the sheep, but he himself sits in Windhoek and often his workers get very little money. Okay, some black farmers do not have enough money to pay their workers well and that is a problem for farm workers. But even if the black farmers have enough money - you can see that because they have big cars - they do not pay their workers well. That is what people say.

Now the difference is: When a white man treats his black farm workers badly, there is the union which will help the workers. But when a black farmer with a big farm and many cars treats his workers badly and gives little money to the people who look after his sheep, then this rich black man will not be taken to court by the union.

That is what I hear from other people and over the radio - that the unions do not go against black farm owners. And I feel sorry for farm workers, who work for black owners, because they have even less rights than those working on white farms. And I wish you would also write about that.

“With independence we got self-governance but not the land”

Interview with Usiel Kandjii

Communal farmer and community activist involved in the
training of farmers

10 July 2007

Mr. Kandjii, why is land reform in Namibia such an emotional issue?

There are various reasons. First, thousands of lives were lost when during colonialism land ownership changed hands, and the current hardships experienced in certain communities today are a direct result of the deprivation of their source of living, namely land, during that time.

Second, there is huge disappointment that with the independence of Namibia the access to our ancestral land was not really facilitated. Most of our ancestral land is still in the hands of a few white farmers. In addition, a perception exists that the land reform process is used as a political tool and is not really benefiting those who should get access to land after independence.

Third, land owners did not pay for the land initially; the land was taken away from the original owners. But now the current owners are benefiting economically from the land reform process because they get compensation from the government, or from willing buyers, when selling their farms. The ‘willing seller-willing buyer’ concept is an insult to those whose land was lost during the colonial period, and the high prices of farms are a frustration to the government and the Namibian people at large.

What do you see as the ultimate aim of land reform?

All wars that have been fought on Namibian soil were about land, because land ownership leads to economic empowerment. Land itself is not renewable and anybody who owns land or has access to it, has power. The struggle for liberation was mainly about land and self-governance. With independence we got self-governance but not the land. The land as a major economic resource of the country

is still in the hands of a few. So the ultimate aim of land reform in Namibia should be to give those who were previously deprived of land, access to land. They should then use it in a sustainable way for the benefit of all citizens, because land is a source which sustains all life on earth.

Do you think that there is a basic difference between how black and white farmers in Namibia are connected to their land?

I do not know. However, in general, blacks are referring to land as motherland while whites are rather talking about fatherland. This difference might have historical interpretations. Black people have a cultural and ancestral connection to land that is deeply rooted in their traditions. They perceive land as motherland due to the fact that they are born and bred in Africa, while white people are perhaps looking at the land that they own as part of their fathers' bravery during colonialism.

What does having land mean to you?

Land or 'having land' has economic, cultural, spiritual and emotional connections for me and for most black people who have been deprived of land historically. Current hardships experienced mostly by my people and most Namibians are a direct result of being robbed of their assets long time ago.

Should land reform be accelerated? And if yes, in which way?

Yes, a definite yes. As previously stated, land is a source which sustains all life on earth, and those who occupy land should produce enough for their own use and the entire country. In my opinion, land reform should be accelerated while taking the following into consideration:

- People who lost land in the past should be considered, in particular people who have historical connections or whose parents had resided on a particular farm.
- People who have proven to be able to produce from the land should enjoy priority during the land reform process.
- The resettlement farms should be acceptable productive economic units, depending on the strength of the settled farmer.
- In cases where land is sold as part of the land reform process, prices of land should be regulated.
- Training, encompassing environmental, social and economical aspects, should be offered to settle emerging farmers.

- Joint ventures between current land owners and previously disadvantaged farmers should be considered as part of the land reform process in order to secure food security and the sharing of knowledge and experiences in farming for the benefit of all.

What do you see as the most important factor in connection with land reform?

Productivity should increase. This applies to both commercial and communal land. Land is land, and even if you do not own land in the communal area in the legal sense, you should own it emotionally and look well after it. Land, both in the communal and in the commercial areas, requires a holistic approach in managing it. People should guard against desertification, which is usually a result of biodiversity loss, and they should neither let the land rest too much nor allow a situation where plants are overgrazed.

Is the connection to land different between older and younger generations?

This is possible, and it might differ from culture to culture. Young people could possibly be less connected to land due to the modern way of life. People living in cities find it hard to understand that city life is indirectly connected to what is happening on the land. In communities where farming or land is regarded as important, normally that tradition of belief is transferred from generation to generation.

Is there a different connection to land between the Ovaherero people and other groups?

Ovaherero people regard land and cattle as two inseparable things, and they value them most. Their whole livelihood is connected to land and cattle; this connection has been part of their existence over many centuries. Place names, praise songs, rituals are testimony of their connection to land and its economic, spiritual and cultural value. The Ovaherero people have survived many hardships over time and their connection to land and its economic value has been and will always be the basis of their existence.

When the Ovaherero through Chief Kutako were spearheading the struggle for independence, the core issue was about land which they lost to German settlers. And currently the Ovaherero through Chief Riruako are spearheading the claim for reparation from the Federal Republic of Germany, and the core issue will always be land. We lost land and cattle and with this we lost our dignity. In order to restore our dignity you need a basis, and this base is always land. Unfortunately I cannot comment on how other people value land.

“Every peaceful day is a good day”

Interview with Gerd Wölbling,

Commercial farmer on Farm Hebron near Okakarara

June 2007

Coming from Okakarara, a village in the former ‘Hereroland’, I turn south, driving on dusty roads; the landscape to the left and to the right is bushy, grey and dry. After a few kilometers, I see the sign ‘Farm Hebron’. I also see some cattle and a few houses, obviously the houses of the farm workers, and turn into the yard of the farm. It is swept and well maintained, the farm buildings are spread out well ordered on a wide square.

The farmer Gerd Wölbling ends his conversation with an employee, invites me into his house and offers me a hot cup of coffee on the big veranda. We exchange information, how was the rain this year, is it colder today than yesterday, what is the kindergarten project in Okakarara doing? Then we start with the interview.

The farm Hebron was originally part of Hereroland. It was confiscated by the German colonial government in 1904 and remained crown land under South African rule until 1954, when it was allocated to a white South African family. This family kept it for 10 years, even though they would have liked to resell the farm earlier, because there were far too few fences and little water. However, according to their contract, they had to hold out for 10 years. The farm then became the property of a fish factory, until the Wölbling family bought it 8 years later. The farm has been in the possession of the Wölbling family since 1972. Gerd Wölbling took over the management of the family farm in 1998.

The owner of Farm Hebron is Gerd Wölbling’s mother; he himself leases the farm from her. In 1984, Gerd’s father died and Gerd, today a young farmer in his early 30s, had to learn farming at an early age to help his mother. At some point, he will become its rightful owner, provided the farm is then still owned by the family. “Today we don’t know what will happen to the land,” he says.

The farm consists of a simple farmhouse and a few farm buildings. The income of the farm is based on cattle breeding, goat keeping and hunting. Additionally, Gerd Wölbling has a small general store in Okakarara. About 30 people live on the farm; some farm families are Ovahereros, others are Ovambos. Gerd Wölbling speaks fluent Herero.

There is a good and trustful relationship between farmer and farm workers. All employees own a few cattle and goats, some of which graze on the farm, others in the adjacent municipal area.

Since he has leased the farm, Gerd Wölbling has invested time, energy and money in the farm: He has had his farm connected to the national power network, built houses for the employees, enlarged his own house and 'de-bushed' the farm (clearing bushes to improve the pasture) – he has invested almost half of the farm value to do this. Over the next 10 years, further bush clearance will be necessary, as well as the maintenance and expansion of fences and cattle posts.

Mr. Wölbling, how would you describe your relationship with your farm?

I have been a farmer since 1992. Because my father died early and my mother was alone, I learned about farming quite early. After school I studied agriculture in Germany, but I always looked forward to coming back. Already after one year in Germany, I realized how much I missed the farm.

For me, the farm is a commercial enterprise and I have to run it as a business. But to me, it is also much more; it is also my home. In other areas, I feel strange, but when I see the red sand here, the termite mounds, the trees, I feel like I am at home.

What has changed during the past years?

Our environment has become more hostile and unfriendly since independence. In the past, we had competent back-up from agricultural organizations, but today the veterinary fence is no longer maintained, there is little technical government support, and most of the work has to be done by the farmers themselves; also the hospitals and schools no longer function as they used to, and all these problems are a burden for those farmers who want to take good care of their staff. Many farmers try to improve their relationship with the local people in their area, donate meat to schools, old people's homes, bazaars, etc. as a sign of goodwill to build a culture of give and take.

The markets are also more regulated now, especially for sheep farmers; we cannot simply sell more lamb to South Africa. The ministries' attitude towards white farmers is rather averse, and white farmers have no political weight anymore.

Do you think that black and white Namibians have a different connection with land?

Yes, definitely. Back then, when the Whites came to the country and said the land now belongs to us, they meant: We own everything - the soil, the plants, the game. The Africans meant by 'belong': We own the right of use. The problem today is that 95% of the people here believe that every white person has a farm and all white farmers are rich because they stole the land. This view is one reason why one person does not understand the other.

Do you think that the graves of the ancestors play a role in the relationship with land?

Yes, I think nomadic culture used to be characterized by fixed points of contact such as graves and watering places, and people still sing songs about these places. But today the graves of the ancestors of the German farmers are also an integral part of a farm, they are important for the identity and the roots with the land; they express respect for the achievements of the pioneers.

Are you afraid that you might one day be forced to sell your land?

I am not afraid, but I am cautious. I had insight into political decision-making processes when I was on the board of the Namibian Farmers' Association for four years. Today I say: Every peaceful day is a good day. Every day that we work together to find a peaceful solution is a day won. The urgency of land reform will decrease with time, but if SWAPO one day will have to deal with a strong opposition, the land question will become more politicized and emotionalized again, and this could become dangerous.

What would you do if you received an expropriation order?

I would have to deal with it, because I know that the Hereros want land. I try to remain relatively confident, because there would be enough other things to do besides farming. But if I lose the farm I also lose my home.

Are you discussing land reform with your neighbors?

My neighbors are Boers, Herero communal farmers, Ovambo Affirmative Action farmers, German-Namibians and one foreigner - the latter has just received a letter asking him to sell his farm to the government.

The Osire-Waterberg Farmers' Association is very active; we have three to five events a year. Yes, and we discuss land reform almost every time we meet. It's a weird psychology, there are times when everyone is talking about it, and it's like a constant threat. And then suddenly you get tired of it, and you just don't mention the topic anymore.

Five years ago, I once sketched out how things could go with land reform. At that time, 40 - 50,000 hectares of the farms that belonged to our Farmers' Association were in foreign hands, and I suggested that within the next ten years we could sell half of that area to the state. This almost led to an uprising! In the meantime, 3 of our members have received a letter of expropriation for a total of 5 farms in the last 5 years.

Here we are farming in a hotspot: Hereroland. Five years ago, you couldn't talk about it, today everybody is talking about it, and the emotions are not boiling over anymore. In principle, we know that land reform is necessary, and it is taking place. For me it is important that production and that the quality of agricultural products are maintained. There must therefore be a balance between political and economic considerations.

“For the Herero, no value is attached to land, value is attached to cattle”

Interview with Assaph Kandjeo

Farmer and pastor in Okakarara

June 2007 at Steps for Children House in Okakarara

Assaph Kandjeo grew up in a village in the rural area near Okakarara. Today he is working as a pastor in Okakarara and has also started to work on a plot near the village.

Mr. Kandjeo, why is land reform such an emotional issue?

People want their land back. To the Hereros belonged the land between Otavi and Okahandja, between Otjimbingwe, Omaruru and Gobabis. The majority of our land was taken after the 1904 war, the land that belonged to the Herero, Mbandero and Damara people, land that is good for animal farming.

As Ovaherero we are saying: We want our land back. But after independence this did not happen because of the policy of national reconciliation. Therefore what is in the minds of the people is not possible. Commercial farms have title deeds and they are protected.

Also, the majority of resettled people in Namibia are from the Oshivambo speaking community, they are the ones that are resettled most. But they are not the ones that lost land. Also within this area, many Oshivambo speaking people are resettled. However, I think that people who want land should buy the land from current farmers – it should not be given for free to non-Herero speaking persons.

However, there are no discussions about farm invasions of white farms here. People from near and far go to German farmers to buy, for example, grass from them. But the politics of the Ovaherero people is: they want their land back. If the government continues buying farms and giving them for free to other tribes, the Ovaherero will lose patience in this matter, and this will be a danger to political peace.

How do you see the current land reform process?

The government is giving people farms, but it does not necessarily advance their farming skills to become good commercial farmers. This is not good. It is expensive for the government if the resettled people do not contribute to the economy of the country. Therefore land reform is not a good system currently - buying farms and resettling people. I have seen two commercial farms nearby – they are no more of any value; the village (communal) farms are better than that. It is a waste of resources. It is better to keep the commercial farms as they are and help landless people who want to farm with money, loans and technical assistance.

Who are landless people? There are many homesteads in the communal areas here with more than 500 cattle – and the people are surviving. But the communal land has become old, the land is tired. Therefore let government develop the eastern part of Hereroland, take water to those places further east and set up water posts - and many people will move there for farming purposes. But let the tired land rest for 10 to 15 years in the meantime.

How do you see expropriation?

Expropriation is a sensitive issue. If government indeed intends to promote farming and is not merely looking for votes, then it should forget about buying farms for resettlement. Go to the communal areas and educate and encourage communal farmers with many cattle to see the importance of buying their own farms. People who invest their money into farms will keep them. People with only two or three heads of cattle can then remain in the communal areas.

If government could take responsibility and help to turn resettlement farms into productive commercial farms by organising training for communal farmers and by supporting growing friendships between communal farmers and today's commercial farmers – that could break the tension. This would be more helpful than leaving this kind of development to the white people and non-governmental organisations because they are just citizens like all other people in the country.

What kind of connection do the Ovaherero have with the land?

For the Hereros, no value is attached to land, value is attached to cattle. As long as there is water and grass, that is fine, and then you move with the rain. For the Ovambo there could be a different feeling: They grow crops, and for this they have to settle at a certain place and then attach a different value to the land. Whites also attach value to land; they make it green and look well after the piece of land they are living on. You might value the land more if you buy it, pay for it and work on it.

Therefore, if we want to keep the value of the land, let people work for it so that they will value it.

How important are the graves on the land?

In general, until 1946 Herero people were not having graves, graves only became important for the first time when the bones of Chief Samuel Maharero were brought back from Botswana. Since then people go to the graves and touch them; but it was a political move, it is not an old tradition. Going back to graves is a new thing. The historical sites on farms were very important, yes, Hereros called their ancestors and they are still doing it. But it is different now because of politics.

In the old times among the Ovaherero speaking people, if an elder died, people would move on, because the person would be buried in the kraal. You were forced to move because you were not allowed to see a grave.

“I trust that the Namibian government will keep to law and order”

Interview with Harry Schneider-Waterberg

Commercial farmer on farm Okosongomingo, Otjiwarongo

June 2007

Harry Schneider-Waterberg is farmer on farm Okosongomingo, situated near the historic Waterberg. With 40,000 hectares, it is the largest farm in that area. The farm was acquired by Harry's grandfather in 1909, who came to Namibia as a soldier of the German colonial forces.

In 1912, he built the present residential house. Returning from the First World War, he found it burned down by English Union troops, but rebuilt and enlarged it. From the wide veranda, you look out over the majestic massif of the great Waterberg. The area in front of the mountain was part of the battlefield of the war between the Herero and the German Schutztruppe in August 1904.

Harry's grandfather was a typical pioneer of his time, who contributed with idealistic and perhaps romantic ideas to the development of the German colony after 1908. He was very interested in the history of the country, and the Herero people in the surrounding area told him many stories about their experiences during the colonial war. He had early contact with the relatives of the influential chief Kambasembi, who died in 1903, as well as with his successor Salatiel, who had returned from Angola in the 1930s to the old residence in the 'Reserve' of Okakarara. The good relations between the families have been maintained until today.

The addition of the farm name to the surname of the farm owner was customary at that time, and in 1952, Grandfather Schneider decided to legalize the double name for the family. However, instead of using the farm name Okosongomingo (place of the young cattle), which was melodic, historical and expressive, he chose the name Waterberg, which was understandable in all national languages.

Today the farm is a family property as a limited liability company. Harry Schneider-Waterberg, grandson of the first owner and the youngest of four siblings, is its administrator and manager. The farm is mainly a cattle and guest farm, with about 1,800 cattle and 10 - 16 hunting guests per year. In addition to his family, there are about 150 people living on the farm, 20 of whom are permanently employed. According to Schneider-Waterberg, the farm workers' salaries are above average.

Mr Schneider-Waterberg, how would you describe your relationship with your land?

Before his death, my grandfather determined that the farm should remain in the family for at least three more generations. After my father, who is also still living on the farm, I am the second generation and my son the third one. For me, the will of my grandfather means a strong sense of responsibility towards this land - economically, historically, ecologically and socially, and I hope my son will see it the same way.

But how do you teach a child to love the farm? How do you teach him a sense of responsibility for a family farm? I don't know exactly, but I did something wrong if my son would not feel the same love for this farm as I do.

How was this love taught to you?

The emotional attachment to a piece of land grows over the years. In the beginning, the farm was for me a business like any other, but because I was able to build something here, the identification with this farm has grown. Today I couldn't live anywhere else but on this farm. I think it is important to have the opportunity to build something. We are all individualists, so each generation must have the opportunity to create something of their own, because only then do you develop a sense of identity.

This individualism of farmers, which develops even more strongly on a farm than in a city, contributes to the fact that a farm develops from generation to generation. Each generation adds something, so that an ever closer bond is formed. You also connect with the land by taking responsibility for it.

What does this responsibility look like?

With a farm, you initially assume an economic responsibility as a producer. You also take on an ecological responsibility, because you have to fight erosion and bush encroachment - and the millions we have spent on erosion control are disproportionate to the benefits! And then we also have a historical responsibility

- for example, there is an ancestral tree forest on our farm that is unique in this environment, and we must protect and preserve it.

We also have a social responsibility. Many things that farmers do as a matter of course for their employees are unknown: Every other week I drive the farm workers' children to school in a small truck and take responsibility for their safety. We drive sick people to the hospital, take care of funerals and coffins, take care of the elderly and pensioners and look for a job for them; for example, we want to set up a campsite on this farm that they can manage.

The farm is also a home for the farm workers, and that is why we also assume holistic and full responsibility for their future after retirement. Already since 1956, one of our farms was made available to the pensioners and farm workers, with about 100 of their own cattle, and I help them to manage the farm.

I can see that a lot of construction is going on here. Are you not afraid of expropriation?

I invest, build, enlarge - this increases the value of the farm and therefore it will have a higher value, even in case of expropriation, and I will be compensated accordingly. I trust in the legal security I enjoy in this state and in the compliance with the land reform laws that the government has drafted. Three years ago, there was a big dispute with the farm workers union on our farm, which was partly brought into the farm from outside and was politically motivated. There were long investigations and discussions, but in the end things were done according to the law - this has greatly strengthened my confidence in the legal security in this country.

And how do you see the current land reform?

Compared to Zimbabwe and South Africa, land reform in Namibia has been a success so far. But land reform at present has nothing to do with economics, it is a black and white matter and it is time that this approach will stop. I would like to see a shift in focus from the political to the economic.

“Land and cattle are inseparable to the Herero people”

Interview with Mr. Ueriuka Festus Tjikuua

Community leader and farmer

2007 and 2008, Windhoek, and November 2020, Okakarara

Mr. Tjikuua, Ovaherero are not interested in land, they are only interested in cattle. Is this true?

Land and cattle are inseparable to Ovaherero people. If a Herero is looking for land, only two things are important – is there enough water, in dams or at any water points, and is there grazing suitable for cattle; everything else does not matter. The Ovaherero were basically not attached to a specific farm or piece of land; they were nomadic people and were always looking for new grazing.

Cattle are of utmost importance for Herero people. They have important spiritual and ritual meaning. At every feast or festive occasion cattle must be slaughtered, cattle must change hands, or just be nearby - at weddings, at the name giving of a child, at funerals. If there are no cattle at such an occasion, it is very embarrassing. Cattle heighten the importance of human beings. If there are no cattle at a funeral it is like the funeral of a child.

For example when a wife dies, the husband must return all personal belongings of the wife to the wife's family. In addition, the husband's family has to give them a heifer. There is a word for this heifer (Ongombe jOtjize) which is very difficult to translate into a European language. It says something like a 'cattle for showing gratefulness for the humanness of the woman'.

Do some people speak with their cattle?

Yes, some people have a very close relationship to cattle. They train them to listen to them, and to come to them when they call their names. They identify them by their sound. Some can also see – by the way the cattle are returning from the forest

in the evening or by the way they behave in the morning – what might be coming up, something that might happen in the future.

The Ovaherero appear to be the people who are most hurt by the slowness of land reform and the direction it is taking.

Yes, that is true. They are very angry at what is happening, for example, in the Otjozondjupa and Omaheke regions – where people from other regions are taking over farms on land that was owned by the Ovaherero before German colonization and where their ancestors are also buried. It is possible that the people are going to do something soon: They will start stealing cattle, destroying infrastructure, making people unhappy on their farms so that they will sell them for a cheap price. They have already started doing this, even with people like me who has cattle on communal land, because they argue that people with government jobs have enough money to buy commercial farms. Farming in that area will soon become impossible.

I heard that the issue of graves is something not inherent in traditional Herero culture and that it was only introduced later, with the burial of Chief Maharero in Okahandja?

Yes, it is true that commemorations at the graves of chiefs are something which only came later in Herero history. Older places of burial are not really marked by graves, though it was custom to bury, especially heads of a family, at a prominent place such as under a big tree or near another landmark. People knew where about their ancestors were buried, and it was kept in the memory of people, even if they later did not find the exact place.

When Herero people come near the place where they know an ancestor is buried, they will stop and either talk to the spirit or just be silent and take some soil into the mouth and spit it out again. Even when they are driving in a car on a road, and when they are near such a grave, they will turn off the music and stop eating; they will take off their hat, and they will stop talking for a while to show respect.

Today, both white people and Herero people have ancestral graves on the same land. How can ancestral claims to the same land be harmonized among German and Herero farmers?

Some Ovaherero people passed away on German soil during the struggle for Namibian independence and are buried in Germany, but this does not mean their Namibian relatives or offspring should claim ownership over German land.

Graves alone are not a justification or a criterion for land claim, but could serve as evidence that indeed a person has historical linkage to a certain area. The question is how the ancestors got access to that land, and whether they were from Africa or Europe. If such a claim is made from both Ovaherero and Ovandoitji (German) farmers, then I would suggest a well-structured dialogue between the two groups to find an amicable solution.

...

November 2020

Mr Tjikuua, 13 years later, many developments with respect to land reform have taken place. For example, a second land conference was organized in 2018. In which way was this conference important for you?

The Second National Land Conference was important for me, because it addressed the issue of ancestral land which was in the interest of those Namibians who lost land due to colonial occupation.

It was also of cardinal importance for me in that the conference passed resolutions that would address the land issue amicably. These resolutions include that a Namibian should not own more than one commercial farm and that the size of such a farm should not be more than 3,000 hectares, depending on its production capacity. In addition, the resolution on unhindered access to ancestral grave sites on commercial farms for burial and memorialization was important for many of us, who have ancestral graves on those farms occupied by other Namibians.

How will the negotiations between Namibia and Germany with respect to the genocide reparations or restitution affect the land reform process in the future?

The descendants of the victims of the 1904-1908 genocide prioritized land as the primary issue of reparation. They see other issues that will address the socio-economic impact of genocide as secondary to land. In that respect, the conclusion of a successful negotiation on the genocide process will be determined by meaningful funding for land reform. Land reform through the framework of reparation and in line with the resolutions of the Second National Land Conference will change the existing status of unfair land ownership.

However, in my opinion, the issue of reparation shouldn't be the only means to return land to those who lost land due to the colonial wars of genocide and colonial occupation. I strongly feel that our Namibian citizens of German ancestry, who possess more than one farm, should volunteer to surrender land to those who lost

land as a token of reconciliation between them and the descendants of the victims of the 1904 to 1908 genocide.

You were awarded a resettlement farm in 2016 – what does this mean to you as a farmer?

Yes, I was resettled in 2016, but it has not been getting something on a silver platter due to challenges I have to face, among others the absence of accommodation for me except for the workers, which I found in a bad condition; the faulty wind pump systems and fences which I have to maintain at my own cost; the relationship with my new German neighbors which I had to normalize; criminal cases involving the theft of my cattle and goats, and opportunistic predators like jackals and leopards which killed a considerable number of my goats and calves. Despite of all these mishaps I'm happy that my resettlement farm is situated in the vicinity of where one of my ancestors is buried – hence its renaming as "Otjovanene", meaning the domicile of my elders.

“We are thinking about a new kind of farm community”

Interview with Mr Ulf-Dieter and Ms Christine Voigts

Commercial farmers on farm Krumhuk, Windhoek

July 2007 and October 2020

The farm Krumhuk came into the possession of the Voigts family more than 120 years ago and had been mainly a cattle and game farm for many years. Since 1996, farming activities have been diversified by including a dairy, meat processing facilities, trophy hunting, guest houses, olive plantations, vegetable gardens, and a small crafts centre. Overall, about 75 people are living on the farm and are involved in different farming activities.

The Krumhuk management tries to develop new ways of working together as a farm community who lives on the land and off the land. The present owners, Ulf-Dieter and Christine Voigts, feel that land cannot really be owned privately but should be used and managed for the benefit of all people who are living on it. Land should not only be economically but also be ‘socially productive’. Farm workers and their children should have the same rights to live and work on the land as the farm owners’ children, depending on certain criteria such as commitment to the farming business etc.

The Voigts see land reform as necessary. They doubt, however, whether the present land reform process will really bring about a fundamental change in sustainable social and economic land use, because “basically we need a new concept of land, and the step into the future should be accompanied by fundamentally new ways of thinking.”

Christine and Ulf-Dieter, what does land ownership mean to you?

Christine: Over time, we have come to the conclusion that I cannot really own land as my private property. “Mine” is actually only what I generate on a piece of land.

As a landowner, you should cultivate your land for the benefit of the community and for the good of the soil.

Ulf-Dieter: Today many farmers have a huge piece of land and two or three employees who live there. The farmer himself often lives in the city and comes perhaps once a week to check on things. A farm like this may be economically productive, but remains completely unproductive in social terms. I imagine that Government is disappointed that not more attempts are made to offer more people a chance to live on and off the land. On the contrary, farmers today try to work with as few employees as possible. Of course, this is also due to the introduction of minimum wages and the activities of the trade unions. And yet, it is a wrong step.

How do you decide who should or should not have the opportunity to live on a certain piece of land?

Christine: We are looking for new models to live together as a farm community. We want to share rights and responsibilities, but we are still working out what such a farm community could like in concrete terms. Fact is that some of the people who work on this farm have lived here just as long as Ulf's family, and their children are now the fourth generation living on Krumhuk, just like ours. So why should our children have a greater right to stay and live here? A decisive criterion could be: What contribution do they make to the farm and to the farm community? And who decides on this? The community!

Of course, this approach is completely new, and it is very difficult to organize this in a community of very different people - with different levels of education, from different cultures and with different rights. But the question we have to answer is: What will become of all the children who were born on this farm and have grown up here?

In the past, the children of farm employees were sent away at the age of 18, unless they also worked as farm workers on the farm, while the farm owner's son took over the farm. Nowadays, we would like to decide together who can live here and who can't, based on merit and ability. It is a difficult process, but we have to get there. We can't say, our son gets the farm and the rest has to go. That's no longer possible today, and we have to think in a completely new way.

Why is land such an emotional issue?

Ulf-Dieter: I grew up on this farm, my parents and grandparents developed this farm. I feel bound to this tradition and feel obliged to preserve its heritage. I am also personally attached to this land, and when this old family estate is in danger, emotions are stirred. When farms change hands all the time, it's different.

So the longer a farm is owned by a family, the stronger the emotional bond?

Christine: Yes, that is something very real. Tradition is something that is alive. Our ancestors are all still around us, you can feel that, and the life of your ancestors gives you support and security. On the other hand, an old family estate like this also restricts your choices in life, because you are not free but feel bound to this tradition and this heritage. Many children of farmers feel this very strongly.

I experienced this constriction with Ulf, when, after the sudden death of his two brothers, he was the only son standing on this farm. At that time, the family estate consisted of three farms, and I noticed how this responsibility almost killed him. He then sold two farms relatively quickly. I thought this was very wise, because it freed him from too much burden and responsibility. It was a courageous step.

Then I experienced it again with our son who grew up here as heir in the fourth generation. There was always the unspoken question whether he would take over the farm, he as an individual. And then we took this step: to move away from the farm as a private family estate and into a company partnership. We wanted to free this farm from personal ownership and distribute the individual responsibility from one or two people to a larger community. Even the first step was a great personal relief for me.

Ulf-Dieter: Yes, when taking over the farm, Christine asked quite quickly: What are the two of us doing alone on this huge piece of land? There is so much space here, so much potential, why don't we attract other people to it, why don't we also get ideas from outside and work together. Let's just swim against the current.

What is the actual goal of land reform in Namibia?

Ulf-Dieter: We see land reform as necessary. We already thought along these lines back then, 12 years before independence, when we sold two of our three farms. But there are so many opinions, and we know so little about each other. I think that redistribution of land must take place, but I do not have a solution. We can of course make suggestions, but then you have to know why people actually want land.

Christine: There are two points of view for me: one is the economic aspect or the extent to which a farm is used as a form of livelihood. It must be large enough so that those who use it can meet their economic needs. The other aspect is the general responsibility for land and soil and the way of managing it so that it is conserved or even improved. For me, the ideal land reform would ensure that all people who own a piece of land care for it and maintain it, take responsibility and manage it in a healthy way.

Ulf-Dieter: In reality, this is of course difficult to achieve. We white farmers made many mistakes; we exploited the land and enriched ourselves materially from it. The people who now want land have a lot of catching up to do in material terms - they want to have land and profit from it - just like most farmers.

Today, there are also more and more white businesspersons who buy farms without being farmers at all. All they do is turning their farms into a business: running a lodge, a hunting farm, etc. Agriculture suffers from this, because we have to use the land in such a way that it can regenerate itself so that as many people as possible can live on it.

Do white and black farmers have different relations to land?

Ulf-Dieter: I think that there is still a pretty big difference between black and white. We Germans, but also the Boers, are still very much influenced by the culture of old Europe, while many black farmers used to be either nomads or, if they were temporarily resident, they did not have such a strong connection to a specific piece of land, because they moved on when there was no more water or it had rained badly. This is why we have been shaped differently in the past.

Christine: I think in the past, the relationship to the land was strongly influenced by tradition and culture. Today it differs from individual to individual. Some German farmers are very deeply rooted with their land because their grandfather already had the land, and others are deeply connected with the land because the farm is their life's work and they love the land. And I believe that today we find these differences also among black people. Some black farmers still live strongly in their African tradition, but on the other hand, this tradition is changing.

...

October 2020

Thirteen years later, how were you able to implement your ideas about a new kind of farm community?

During the past 13 years, we have experienced that relinquishing private ownership of a farm disengages the farm to a great extent from personal interests and thus enables potential donors, their interest, enthusiasm and financial support to come in. This has been of great help during challenging times like droughts and when creating new projects (education, research, etc).

In this way, it was very successful to transfer the land from private ownership into a “trust not for gain”. This trust has a board of seven directors, who are responsible for the land being used according to the biodynamic agricultural method and that this land is accessible to persons with skills in organic or biodynamic agriculture.

The decision on who may join the community or not is taken by the board as well as by the community management itself. The criteria are the need for such an applicant, the person’s skills, and how he or she is supporting the farm concept. Young people from the community who were born or have grown up in Krumhuk have preference when applying. Money, political or cultural background is not a determining factor.

With time, new people have joined us in the management and as part of the work force. However, it is not easy to find people with the right skills and who are willing to join us in our tasks.

What were specific challenges during the last 12 years?

Specific challenges were the availability of people with agricultural skills. For that reason, we started an agricultural training center at Krumhuk in 2010 but had to close it again after 7 years due to lack of funds and support from the Namibian government. Many of those who were trained during that period could find a job in agriculture, hospitality or elsewhere, five of them in the Krumhuk Community, and some even in leading positions. Today we are still looking for possibilities to train young people in agriculture.

Today, we are more than ever convinced that land ownership remains a crucial question and that land should not belong to anybody, but be made available to all people who want to work on the land in a sustainable, empowering and future-oriented way as a farm community. A challenging project like Krumhuk thereby needs cooperation with independent and capable counseling from outside.

The center of such a community and of such a farming project should not be a team of people, a tradition or a specific family but an **idea** that is strong and clear enough to overcome any crisis economically, socially or culturally. We need to work in HARMONY WITH NATURE (our Krumhuk Logo) and to heal land, plants and animals, as well as humans.

“I am dreaming and hoping again for better times to come”

Interview with Mr Guido von Wietersheim

Commercial farmer on farm Namseb, Maltahöhe

October 2007 and October 2020

Farm Namseb became the property of the von Wietersheim family in 2007. Before, it belonged to an elderly widow who had to sell the farm because of old age. According to land reform policies, she had to offer the farm to the Namibian government first. She then received a ‘waiver’ that allowed her to sell the farm on the free market. Namseb used to be a sheep and cattle farm and also has a country lodge. Guido, 29, manages both the farm and the lodge. He grew up on a farm and loves farming and life on the farm.

Guido, at a time when most white farmers are insecure or anxious because of land reform, you bought a farm. Isn't that an unusual step?

Yes, it is. That was also the first reaction of many who said, why are you buying a farm at this time of land reform? But that was not an issue for us. We said: We want this, and we are doing it now! The prerequisite was, of course, that the farm had a waiver from the government, i.e. that it had already been offered to the government. We only looked at farms that the government had already rejected.

Does that give you security that you will not be expropriated in the future?

You cannot say, because I have a waiver, I cannot be expropriated. The waiver is only a small footnote that makes expropriation less likely in the near future. Our approach, however, is consistent with the government's land reform and its laws. We only bought one farm, not several ones; we are Namibian citizens, and I have confidence in the future of this farm.

What made you decide to live your life as a farmer?

Farming has always been my great desire. I grew up on a Namibian farm, even went to school there, to a farm school, and spent many years of my life there. After that, I never found an area of interest that really captivated me. During my studies in Germany I lived on a German farm for some years, helped with the harvest every year, I became like a member of the family and got the German hunting license. But in the back of my head and heart I always had a farm in Namibia on my mind.

Was it the right decision to come back and start life as a farmer?

I have no doubt about that, even though I am still overwhelmed by all the new things that I have to learn and to manage. I am a farmer's son, but there is so much that I still have to learn. Of course, there were days when I had doubts: This huge project, will I be able to manage? There was this fear of the huge responsibility - for the farm and for so many people who depend on me. Suddenly I had to deal with so many things I didn't even know about and had to make important decisions. But then I thought to myself that there was no alternative. I am in a phase when I am building a big project, and in the future, there will be quieter times.

Do you have a vision for this farm in 10 years?

In 10 years, I see that our lodge will be running well and routinely. I want it to have a good name, to be known for decent accommodation and good food - not a fancy luxury lodge, but a country lodge with the reputation that it is original, near to nature and yet something special, where you can find peace and relax.

But my dream is above all a well developed farm with neat fences, animal posts and wind pumps, a well organized farm with cattle and goats and a beautiful garden with vegetables and fruit, a vibrant farm with staff who feels comfortable and happy and enjoys working with me.

Have you seen or heard of Resettlement Farms near your farm?

I haven't seen any myself, but you hear a lot of negative things. The general picture is that they are handed over to people who then wait for the government to support them and who do nothing themselves. And after a few months, the farms are inevitably ruined, all the boreholes are broken, the houses are dilapidated, the people are dependent and waiting for a miracle to happen.

Do you have any idea how this could be done better or what your contribution could be?

No, I don't have any concrete thoughts yet on how I, as a farmer, could help my colleagues; I am too busy with my own farm at the moment. But after my experiences on this farm I could not imagine taking over such a resettlement farm without the financial backup I have here on this farm. Without this backup, this farm would not be better off than the resettlement farms as they are alleged to be. That the resettlement farmers are having a hard time is something I can understand very well.

I can only conclude that the system suffers from the fact that people do not have the necessary finances to run a farm effectively - even if they had the necessary expertise. I also have little know-how, but you can acquire it, you can get advice from AGRA, which is an agricultural cooperative, and from your neighbors. However, if the money isn't there, the farm is neglected and breaks down.

It would affect me very much if I had no money at all. Therefore, we have to find a way to support the resettlement farmers financially so that the infrastructure doesn't break down. With a proper infrastructure, most resettlement farmers will be able to farm well. And maybe many things are also being exaggerated - maybe there are resettlement farms that work well and give the people what they have hoped for: a piece of land on which they can live and farm in peace.

Do you think that black farmers have a different relationship to the land than white farmers?

I think that black farmers may not have as romantic a relationship with the land as many white people. For me, the country has not only an economic component but also a strong emotional and romantic one. I just love living here, enjoying the beauty of nature. I enjoy this piece of Africa, because I can hunt here, experience adventures, be an explorer and pioneer; to me, my farm is undiscovered territory.

I suppose that for black farmers it might be different. Maybe they mainly want to have a place of their own, to be their own boss on their own land and to enjoy the advantages of a farm: hunting, always having enough meat and having enough living space for family and friends.

Isn't this romantic idea of 'a farm in Africa' something that is more common for people from Europe?

Yes, maybe it's not a thing between black and white, but rather a question from which cultural circle you come. Many farms of the white Boers here are often very functional, without much sense for romance or beauty, the house is as close to the road as possible, everything must function...

Some black farmers have also mentioned romantic components: the desire to live in nature, to enjoy the peace of nature.

I think that life on a farm is so pleasant for many because it's not so regulated; you have more freedom to organize your day. And land certainly evokes emotions, both for black and white. Once you have taken on responsibility for a piece of land, there is probably no big difference. As soon as this land became my land, I reacted very aggressively and emotionally to any violation of this land with which I had nothing to do before. And I think this is the same for most people, no matter whether you are black or white.

In this country, you inevitably come across the historical issue that the indigenous people felt it was a huge violation when the whites invaded their land and took it away. Do you feel some kind of guilt or the need to make amends?

It is difficult for me as a Namibian in the 4th generation to understand what really happened back then, how people treated each other, what their relationship was like. I actually see no reason today to blame myself or to say that I owe someone something. Today land and farms in Namibia are freely traded, I didn't take this farm away from anyone, it was an object that was on the market and we bought it.

The history of the world has moved so fast, and the face of the world has changed so much that it would not be good to deal now with the question of past ownership and who once owned what. We do have a certain obligation to deal responsibly with what we have, and I respect the fact that I am privileged to own a piece of land today. I therefore make an effort to integrate those who once lived here.

...

October 2020

Thirteen years later, how has your farm changed? Could you realize your dreams?

After living on the farm for thirteen years, I have learned a lot about the reality of farming in a semi-desert. It does not matter how good a farmer you are and how sophisticated your management is planned, after a few years of drought you simply run out of options and farming activities come to a grinding halt.

We had good rainy seasons from 2008 until 2013 with enough rain to sustain the vegetation on the farm and allow for livestock and game to thrive. We farmed with sheep and goats in the beginning and switched to cattle later. At the same time, the game numbers increased very well and we bought and introduced some more game into the farm. Tourism and hunting was steadily increasing and the lodge was doing quite well.

Then the drought started in the south in 2013 and we have not received sufficient rain since then. Farming activity decreased over the years and completely ceased in 2017. Game numbers had to be reduced and the remaining animals had to be fed at huge costs in order to keep them alive, but in the end most of the game died or wandered off through the fences.

This means that the land we are living on cannot provide us with any form of income anymore. Our only source of income over the last two years was the mainstream tourism that kept the lodge running. Tourism ended abruptly in March 2020 when Namibia went into lockdown because of the international corona-crisis.

Currently there are no farming activities going on and the lodge is closed temporarily. There are no permanent employees on the farm or lodge since we had to let go all our staff. 2020 certainly is the most difficult year we have experienced on the farm so far and we can only hope for good rain in the coming rainy season as well as for the normalization of international travel and tourism.

We had some very good years on the farm and everything was going well for the first 6 years. We had great and reliable staff at the lodge and happy guests and hunting clients. In many ways I could realize my dreams. Now I am dreaming and hoping again, for better times to come.

What have been your experiences with respect to land reform?

Regarding land reform, we sold a part of the farm to the government in 2014 for resettlement. Being close to Maltahöhe in an area mainly and historically populated by the Nama people, it came as a surprise to the local community that none of its members who had applied for resettlement was offered the land. Instead, the land was given for resettlement to a fully employed government official from the far-away Zambesi Region who certainly had no intention of resettling in the area. He only comes to visit every few weeks to look after his caretakers on the land and is not involved in any farming activities yet.

This led to some discontent among the locals, some of whom had hoped to be able to make use of the urgently needed land close to their village, but now only see it remaining dormant under the remote control of a person from far away.

In this regard, local communities do not regard land reform as a fair and historically healing process of resettlement, because land acquired by the government is not distributed to the locals living right next to it - or even on it, in the case of farm workers.

Instead of benefitting the people who traditionally owned the land, it is acquired and offered at the expense of the taxpayer to outside strangers who have no connection to the area and the local culture whatsoever.

“Land Reform: An opportunity for a ‘winners’ all’ situation”

Interview with Reimer Thiessen

Commercial farmer on farm Otjimbuku, Hochfeld

July and August 2007

Reimer and Christiane Thiessen live on farm Otjimbuku with their three children. The first white owner of Otjimbuku was a rich family from Germany, who settled there around 1900. Later the farm was purchased by the German businessman Gustav Voigts. Reimer Thiessen's father, who was working as a farm manager for Gustav Voigts, bought the farm from his boss in 1940, and Reimar took over the family farm in 1980. The Thiessens are farming mainly with cattle, but also have a small hunting business.

Reimer, how many people work and live on your farm?

At the moment we employ seven people in addition to eight part-time employees. The relationship with our workers is very good; it is a relationship of trust. We try to involve the people in the activities on the farm, for instance by granting them a 5% share of the hunting income, by allowing them to keep their own livestock, or by starting any other small enterprises they wish. Unfortunately these opportunities are not used to their full potential.

Why did you become a farmer?

I have a very strong emotional connection to this farm, because I grew up here. To be able to live on a farm, you need a deep love for the land and a love for nature. Being dependent on nature in your everyday activities teaches one to remain humble towards life as a whole, and to be constantly reminded that 'nature is smarter than man' - a concept which fast loses its meaning in a high-tech world. I am afraid that mankind will have to pay a high price for this ignorance one day.

What changed for you with independence?

There is this uncertainty. Are you allowed to stay here on your farm or not? But we try to think positively, thinking that we will be okay.

What would you do if you would get an expropriation order?

My spontaneous answer is: Let's wait and see. But no, first I must ensure that I agree with the price, second I would like to take influence that the long-term employees of this farm are not affected negatively.

Do black and white Namibians have a different connection with land?

Yes, definitely. The main difference is that white farmers see their land as an economical factor, while black people have a strong emotional connection with their land.

What is so emotional about land reform?

Due to Namibia's political past, and due to the fact that most of the privately owned land belongs to a small white minority, land is regarded as the dividing factor separating the Namibian nation into rich and poor, into have's and have-not's. Consequently land is being used as a play ball by some politicians to sweep up emotions for political or selfish gain. I think we still need to heal the wounds of the past, and land reform should be seen as a contribution to nation building. The cry for land is basically a cry for the release out of poverty.

How do you see the present process of land reform?

From a financial point of view, farming, in terms of return on investment, is definitely not a lucrative business. Also, the uncertainty regarding security of ownership of land as a white farmer is a factor that needs to be remembered.

Unfortunately, Namibians have the perception that land ownership is the key to poverty alleviation. Most land reform programs therefore are based on land ownership and seen in the context of white farms changing into black ownership, regardless whether the affected people have the operational capital or the necessary managerial and other skills to utilize the land productively.

Giving a piece of developed land to someone who has nothing in terms of finances and other running and infrastructural capital, actually places that person in a position to have less than nothing, because of the responsibility a land user has

in terms of the national economy. This kind of land reform cannot be successful, and Namibia cannot afford to carry on with this craziness of turning more and more productive farmland into unproductive units and at the same time expect poverty to be alleviated. The aim of land reform should rather be to productively use the land so that people are able to move out of poverty, irrespective of land ownership. This means existing land owners should be encouraged, through incentives, to enable poor people to share in the use of the land in a profitable way.

You say ownership as such should not play such an important role?

History has taught us that ownership is quite a safe way of securing economic success, provided that many other conditions are fulfilled. But can land really be owned by individuals and cut into pieces? Today, if I look at my farm, I have difficulties saying: This is all mine! – simply because a piece of paper gives me the legal right to do so.

We land owners should be aware of the enormous responsibility that we have for present and future generations. We should make sure that the piece of land that is entrusted to us is managed for the benefit to all people living on it. In our case these are about 40-50 people who are dependent for their living on this farm.

Land must also be managed for the benefit of future generations. My guiding principle is therefore: We do not own the land; we just manage it for our children.

What do you suggest instead of changing land from white into black ownership?

The present land reform process in Namibia is based on the 'willing buyer–willing seller' concept. I am often puzzled by the narrow framework in which this concept is being discussed, as if this is the beginning and end of the land reform. Why do we not rather become partners in creative entrepreneurship, use unorthodox methods, and move away from conventional thinking in order to address the real issue at stake, namely poverty reduction in Namibia. In other words: Let us start win-win partnerships.

What does such a partnership look like?

It is my firm belief that those who 'have', have a moral obligation to uplift poorer sections of society - not only because of the history of this country but also in terms of its future stability. My plea therefore is: Let us identify areas that present themselves as opportunities for people to create their own wealth, for instance a small stock enterprise for farm workers on a cattle farm, and at the same time develop their entrepreneurial skills. Depending on their degree of motivation, new

entrepreneurs could be raised to a point where they can start their own business or be settled on government farms. Why should it not be possible for a farm worker to eventually become a farm owner? The major benefit under such a scheme would be that the horse gets saddled before it is ridden and not the other way round. People are equipped with skills and resources before they are released into the scrupulous world of the free market.

How would such a partnership between farm owner and farm worker be organised?

An employer could make a certain percentage, say 10%, of his land and infrastructure available on a partnership basis for farm workers to become part of economic activities. Livestock can be bought from the employer, while government could assist financially. Return on such 'investments' by government promises to be much more efficient than buying land for future settlers, without sufficient backup services and without any proof that the newly settled farmer actually practises the commitment needed for being a farmer. At the same time, the farmer will have a certain assurance that he has a workforce that has 'ownership' in the farm.

Furthermore, existing landowners could be asked to form support groups with new commercial farmers. There are already efforts undertaken in this regard by the two agricultural unions. The question is why government has not made this a precondition for any resettlement many years ago. A lot of damage has been done in the meantime.

How could you motivate farm owners to enter into such partnerships?

Land owners could, for instance, be motivated by tax incentives or other financial benefits that reward those, who actively promote the settlement of people on the land.

What are the reasons that such a model is not yet considered in Namibia?

Trust is a precondition for such a partnership, but white farm owners are still regarded as exploiters, as employers who do not abide to the law, or as people who dump their employees on the road. Likewise, white farmers meet any unionist or government representative with the greatest suspicion.

At the same time it is simply not enough for present landowners to state that they are in support of land reform in Namibia; they also have to actively show their commitment by sharing their knowledge, their infrastructure, their land etc.

There is too much mistrust amongst people, and under these circumstances the best intended policy will have no chance to succeed. The air must be cleared, emotions need to come out, and a common goal must be designed before various potential partners can be expected to enter into some kind of joint venture.

Social partners are needed and green light from labour unions and government is vital. Taken the hostility that exists between farm employers and labour unions at this stage, the chances for success are virtually zero, especially as unionists regard land ownership for workers as the fundamental basis of all development.

Government has to come up with a proper strategy and plan of action. Taking decisions without clear guidelines will guarantee one thing only: a 'loser's all' situation. Non-government organisations are needed, especially in the rural areas, to uplift the people and develop their confidence. In many cases their self esteem needs to be uplifted, before they can actually start believing in themselves.

All in all, a more reconciling atmosphere is necessary, and stakeholders in the land reform process need to find more common ground instead of constantly countering each other in order to promote their own narrow agendas. A 'winners all' approach is necessary.

“For me, to be able to live on a farm is more important than owning a farm”

Interview with Markus Berner

Commercial farmer on Farm Peperkorrel, Dordabis

July 2007

Markus Berner is a young farmer on Farm Peperkorrel, east of Windhoek, which he took over from his parents in 2002. Markus Berner is farming with cattle. As the farm is relatively small, he and his family cannot live off cattle farming alone, but also depend on Markus' leather crafts business and his wife's work as a therapist in Windhoek. The Berners have only one employee at present.

In 2002, the farmers Volker and Dörte Berner transferred the farm Peperkorrel to their son Markus. The farm, bought from an Afrikaner, had been in their possession since 1984. The farm lies in the former border area between Herero- and Damaraland. As there were no permanent water points in early times, the area was probably not permanently inhabited. Based on stone tool finds, it is assumed that Bushmen have survived there for a time.

Since 1984, the following investments were made on Peperkorrel: housing for the employees, two guesthouses, halls for a weaving workshop, and another large workshop. Furthermore, fences were drawn, two new boreholes drilled and two old boreholes repaired.

In future, intensive 'de-bushing' of the farm will be necessary to improve the pasture for the cattle. The removal of bushes from an area of 275 hectares costs around N\$ 100,000 - and it only shows a profit after years, so it is a long-term investment.

Markus, how would you describe your relation with your employee?

We work well together. We're about the same age and a bit like buddies - well, not quite because I'm the boss - but more than older farmers might be. The social obligations towards farm workers are very big, we have to provide them with water and food, take care of them when they are sick, etc.

What are the reasons that led you to become a farmer?

I grew up on the farm, and I like being outside. Since 2002, I have been an independent farmer. Before that, since 1997, I had been involved in the management of my parents' farm.

How would you describe your relationship with this farm?

Farming is a way of life; it is the way I want to live. It is often hard, because we have insanely high maintenance costs due to the water systems and fences etc. I have a small farm with high costs and long working hours, but still - I can make decisions and determine my daily routine independently, I don't have an 8-hour job.

We are also here for the sake of the children, they grow up here in nature and we think that is very important. My wife is originally a city child, but she also loves life on the farm and is very involved in the Dordabis Farmers Association.

Are you afraid of a forced sale?

No, I'm not scared at all. I am a Namibian citizen; I have a positive attitude towards the country and have a basic trust in the government, at least no less than people elsewhere in the world. I also know other countries and can make comparisons. We respect our government, racist remarks against whites I do not take so seriously. Our Constitution is our foundation. I am not afraid of the future. Land redistribution needs to take place, but I would like land reform policies to take into account economic rather than political factors so that agricultural production is maintained.

If I had to leave the farm, that would be pretty bad for me. I have no connection to the city; I don't know how I would find my way there. Maybe I would then go to another country; I would not necessarily stay in Namibia. I would go away to get some distance ... but maybe I would come back; this country has such a strong attraction.

Who are your neighbors?

Three neighbors are Afrikaans, four are German, and further away we have several black neighbors. Most of the farmers in this area are connected by radio, and our neighborly relations are very good - in case of fire and emergencies we help each other. There is the Dordabis and Nina Farmers' Association, and the Farmers' Associations do regular training, mostly one-day seminars, for new farmers and farm workers. For example, Farm Garib recently held a driving license course for farm workers.

Would you also work as a farm manager on a farm? Even for a black farmer?

Yes, I would have no problem with that. I would immediately accept a job as a farm manager for a black farmer, if that would mean that I could stay on a farm. For me, farm ownership as such is not so important, but life on the farm. As a farm manager, I would even have less responsibility.

Map of Namibia



After 30 years of independence, land and land reform is still an explosive, emotional issue. Why is this so? What is 'land hunger' all about? Is it true that black and white farmers have a fundamentally different attitude towards land? And what has changed during the past 30 years?

By listening to the views and experiences of black and white landowners, the landless and the 'land hungry' and of farm workers, government officials and agricultural experts, Erika von Wietersheim took a look at land reform from the inside - at its human face. This book provides the reader with exciting new insights and a number of surprising correlations and connections, while also offering an overview of the land reform process in Namibia.



Erika von Wietersheim is a freelance journalist, author and international correspondent. As an educational consultant she has been involved in numerous national and international projects promoting social and political development and inter-cultural understanding. Her interest in the land question also derives from her own experiences as a farmer for more than 20 years.