

PRESENTATION BY THE WILDLIFE SOCIETY OF NAMIBIA TO  
THE LAND REFORM CONFERENCE 24.06.91 - 01.07.91.

The allocation and ownership of land are political issues which must be settled with due recognition of the past and an eye on future development. But however land is allocated or owned will be irrelevant if it is unwisely used.

Namibia has a harsh environment. Most of the country is classified arid or semi-arid and rainfall is usually both low and erratic. We have few permanent rivers and it is often difficult to pump much-needed water from the ground to satisfy ourselves and our livestock. Over much of the country the soils are poor and not suitable for arable farming or in some cases, even stock farming.

Yet Namibians need to live and they need to improve their quality of life. Despite our harsh environment, we have to find a way of harnessing its resources so that our country and its people can prosper.

In the past many of this country's natural resources were treated as if they could be exploited as much as possible and still continue unaffected into the future. This shortsightedness led to the decline of the fishing resource and has contributed to overgrazing and degradation of commercial farmland. Homeland policies, restricting communal farmers to poor grazing lands and limiting their grazing territory, coupled with overstocking have also led to the deterioration of much of the communal land.

Many of the current pressures on our environment are a result of increasing population and poverty. In central Owambo more and more people are making demands on the trees for fuelwood, fencing and building.

The slash and burn agriculture of the Caprivi is also taking its toll of trees. Once the tree cover has gone and after a couple of seasons of crop growing, the soil becomes impoverished and new areas of woodland have to be cleared. The same process then repeats itself. Deforestation along the banks of the Okavango River is leading to increasing soil erosion and the silting of the river.

When people are poor, they have limited options and their main concern is survival rather than the finer points of conservation. Yet it is the rural poor who are having a major impact on our environment. The tragedy is that the impact they are having now will make it even more difficult for future generations to survive in the same circumstances.

A further tragedy is that with the removal of vegetation and the degradation of soil, many options for using land in a productive way are lost to us. In many cases the changes in our environment will take decades to reverse and in others the damage will be permanent.

In order to address these real threats to the country's future development, the Land Reform Conference will need to give full prominence to the way in which land is used if it is to provide the basis for a workable land policy.

The conference will need to bear in mind three key principles: That the appropriate form of land use should be applied to areas of land according to their environmental limitations; land use should take place on a sustainable basis and development should be planned using a multisectoral approach.

In the past the principle of finding the appropriate form of land use according to environmental limitations was violated for political reasons and we should not make the same mistake again. The farms bordering the Namib Desert and many of those in Damaraland were allocated to white farmers as part of colonial land settlement policy. Then under the Odendaal Plan the Damaraland farms were reallocated to people who often had never even lived in the region.

Yet none of these farms should ever have been allocated for stock farming. The area is too marginal, subject to many years of drought, followed by only a few years of adequate or good rainfall. As a result, many of the commercial farms are unoccupied for most of the year and are only occasionally visited by the farmer. In Damaraland several families try to eke out a living on the parched desert soil of one farm and overgrazing is the inevitable result.

But if these vast tracts of land are not suitable for stock or arable farming then what can they be used for? The answer is that these marginal lands are ideal for game farming and associated tourism. Where cattle, goats and sheep struggle to survive in the sparsely vegetated, dry desert margins, gemsbok, springbok and ostrich can flourish. And these animals can be exploited commercially, whether for meat and skins, trophy hunting or for tourism.

In Damaraland, the presence of big game such as elephant and rhino alongside giraffe, gemsbok, springbok and others also provides significant opportunities for economic development.

In Namibia we need to ask if present land use practices in given areas are sustainable. While they can meet the needs of people living there now, can they continue to meet the needs of future generations? Are there alternative forms of land use more suitable and more productive which do not have a destructive effect?

We also need to ask whether a proposed agricultural or irrigation project can continue to give good yields into the future without requiring ever increasing financial inputs which render it uneconomic. Can the soil continue to be used at the same level of intensity?

The third principle is cross-sectoral planning. In the past Government departments, non-government organisations, and parastatals have all gone ahead with land-use projects without involving other departments or organisations. This has resulted in duplication, competition and a lack of co-ordinated planning.

It has also meant that environmental limitations have not been taken into account, resulting in projects with unsound foundations. The days when conservation and development appeared to be mutually exclusive have gone. Developers are increasingly realising that without conservation - the wise and sustainable utilisation of natural resources - there can be no long term development. Conservationists are realising that their function is not to halt development but ensure that it is environmentally sound.

In order to ensure rational land use planning and sustainability, it is essential for a multi-sectoral approach to be taken. This must include not only all government and non-government organisations involved, but the people who will actually use the resources and depend on them for their survival.

Namibia dreams of one day becoming self sufficient in food production. In order to fulfill this dream there is much talk of irrigation schemes along our northern rivers and the expansion of agricultural projects into formerly unused areas. But the existing First National Development Corporation irrigation schemes have already proved to be uneconomic.

Will new schemes be constantly dependent on foreign aid for their success? What will their impact be on the vegetation and soil? Will they need ever increasing amounts of fertiliser to maintain yields as has happened elsewhere? Is there a better way of using this land? These are some of the questions that need to be asked before we embark on major schemes that will provide short term gain but long term economic and environmental bankruptcy.

Namibia needs a system of rational land use planning which at a national and regional level can coordinate the identification of suitable forms of land use according to the environmental limitations of a given area.

It is accepted practice that any business or development venture should be preceded by a feasibility study to determine whether it will be economically viable. Only recently have we realised that we must also investigate the environmental viability of projects as well. We must also build environmental accounting into our national and regional budgeting and development programmes.

This makes a huge amount of sense not only for environmental management for its own sake, but for the economic management of the project. If an agricultural project results in increasing impoverishment of the soil and the need for increasing inputs of fertiliser and chemicals, there will obviously be important cost factors to consider.

The second key principle is that of sustainability. We must use natural resources in a way which enables the present generation to meet its needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

This has many implications for land use practices. Non-sustainable land use results in overgrazing, desertification, deforestation, impoverishment of soil, soil erosion and poverty.

Sustainable land use practices result in long term stability, a healthy environment, a healthy resource base on which development can be founded, and the satisfaction of human needs for food, clean water, fuel, and shelter.