



Closing the gap: bringing communal farmers and service institutions together for livestock and rangeland development

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Namibia is an extremely arid country with very low and erratic rainfall. It has a population of 1.7 million people; most Namibians are subsistence farmers living in communal areas that are underdeveloped and poorly managed. Most farmers raise livestock under harsh climatic conditions. The Sustainable Animal and Range Development Programme (SARDEP) helps communal subsistence farmers improve livestock production and range management. Work done by SARDEP concluded that communal farmers are poorly organized, unaware of participatory development and unfamiliar with the concept of self-help. SARDEP also suggests that sustainable livestock and range development in communal areas cannot be based on the conventional development approach. This top-down and input-oriented approach rarely meets farmer needs. In fact, the non-involvement of farmers in the development process leaves a wide gap of untouched development opportunities. To achieve sustainable development SARDEP decided to support a process that closes this gap between farmers and service institutions. SARDEP developed the 'negotiation approach,' which supports the empowerment of grassroots-level organisations, considered the prime movers for development. At the same time SARDEP helps service institutions interact closely with target groups and reorient their services toward well-formulated farmer needs and demands. To allow such development to grow, SARDEP also contributes at the national level toward formulating a conducive policy framework for sustainable natural resource management.

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Introduction

Located at the south-west tip of the African continent, Namibia was the last African colony to become independent. This vast country (about 1 million km²) with only 1.7 million people became independent in April 1990. The new government embarked on

Communal farmers produce under a different land use situation and have different production objectives than their commercial counterparts. Their farming objective is to produce food mainly for the household while some surplus may enter the market. These farmers have the goal of producing high stock numbers to gain social status and to minimize production risk. The high animal numbers help reduce the risk of total loss during drought. The family bred herd may be divided and spread over different grazing zones to avoid total loss. Subsistence farmers keep their few animals for social obligations (marriage, funerals, fines) and can hardly afford to sell them. Better off communal farmers, however, consider livestock as economic assets and market them more often.

Farmers own mainly indigenous small-framed breeds (Sang/Nguni), which are well adapted to the harsh climate and environment and cope well with disease, heat and drought. Compared to their commercial counterparts, communal farmers apply a low-input, low-intensity and risk-minimizing farming strategy. This strategy is well suited to the communal system, where land and its natural resources (grass, forests, etc.) are not individual property but are jointly owned and used.

Unlike commercial farmers, communal farmers received little or no support from the colonial governments. They were given no subsidies and had no exposure to modern or other forms of agriculture. Even now after 7 years of independence most subsistence farmers survive only on the traditional knowledge of farming.

Unfortunately, many such traditional farming practices are not adapted to new realities, particularly in respect to high population growth and reduced land availability, natural resource degradation and inadequate land administration. Only 30–50 years ago traditional authorities still guided the use of natural resources and dealt with trespassers of local rules, norms and values. Since then this system has eroded seriously. But new western lifestyles, with their operational base and authority located in urban centres, have initiated a whole range of negative social and natural resource processes which could not replace the inexpensive and decentralized management and control mechanisms of traditional authorities.

Meanwhile large tracks of traditional communal grazing areas are mostly under the control of wealthy local businessmen who do not recognize the needs of most subsistence farmers.

Despite strong efforts by the government, urban-based authorities remain indifferent and ineffective in exercising control over natural resources and dealing with the land and its people in a fair and sustainable manner. The government recognizes this situation and envisions setting up regional land boards to confront the present land and natural resource use dilemma. While such land boards may give guidance and help solve land use disputes, in the end the resource users themselves must find new forms of farming and land use practices that are socially acceptable and environmentally and economically sound.

Response of communal farmers to the conventional input-driven development approach

In view of the aggravating circumstances of land availability and overuse of natural resources, subsistence farmers have begun to respond. Alone or with the help of service institutions, they have started forming community-based organizations (CBOs). Namibian subsistence farmers have come to realize that their own CBOs can play a significant role in development. But CBOs are still weak, lacking know-how and management capacity, leadership quality and authority. Grassroots based, CBOs still fear openly challenging urban and traditional authorities. But they have begun to realize that they can overcome their weaknesses. They have experienced a certain

some of the solutions to identified problems; to monitor and assess the tested solutions for possible replication; and to devise a strategy for sustainable rangeland management and improved livestock production.

The present situation as perceived by communal farmers

During the orientation phase SARDEP helped farmers analyse their situation and define their roles. Local households defined their current roles and objectives for sustaining a decent living for a growing population in the communal areas and ensuing subsistence for their households. Using this role and objective, farmers were invited to describe their current situation as follows.

- (i) The **outputs required** to achieve these objectives are not adequate. Livestock production is not qualitatively or quantitatively performing well enough. The poorer segment of the population is increasingly impoverished and is depending more and more on off-farm income sources and migration. The overuse of the rangeland reduces its production potential, resulting in degradation, soil loss, insufficient forage and low tolerance of forage to drought.
- (ii) The **environment** in which the task should be fulfilled is also not conducive. The current land tenure system is uncertain and does not encourage initiative and responsibility for sustainable land use (e.g. fodder subsidies during drought). The population growth rate is very high and exceeds 3% in communal areas. At the current rate Namibia's population will double every 25 years. Communal farmers also have poor access to proper basic infrastructure (roads, communications) and services (extension, research, marketing, credit, veterinary, health, education).
- (iii) Despite **limited internal resources** within communities (e.g. manpower, funds), internal resources are not always adequately supported by **external inputs** from both governmental and non-governmental sources. Not all the inputs from outside are relevant to the needs of self-sustainability. For example, food relief to sustain people is increasing.
- (iv) The **internal structure and organization** of local communities are far from adequate. Because the management capacity for new collective tasks is low, the self-help capacity is low, and dependency on outside support is high. High management capabilities in traditional systems to cope with transhumance, rotational grazing, etc. are disrupted by outside interference. Existing formal structures for resource management and collective decision-making are not effective. Because of land degradation, an increasing part of the poor cannot be sustained by livestock production and has no alternatives for income (KEK/CDC, 1994).

Possible solutions for achieving the future vision of communal farmers

Communal farmers concluded that to achieve the objective of sustainable land use and a decline in human-induced land degradation and to improve the welfare of the rural population, the whole system of communal land use needs to change. Farmers listed eight **strategy components** that need to be addressed by the relevant actors in a well co-ordinated manner to achieve the desired results. Quite correctly they suggest that sustainable resource use in communal areas requires addressing issues that at first sight

The SARDEP strategy

At the end of the orientation phase SARDEP organized a strategy workshop that brought together farmer representatives from the communal areas and about 35 institutions representing government, non-governmental organizations and the private sector. Farmers were given the opportunity to elaborate a joint vision for the future, to list their constraints and to determine self-help solutions and support needed from outside to achieve the vision. Service institutions were also invited to state what services they are providing or plan to provide for communal farmers. From this workshop the following conclusions were drawn: communal farmers have a good idea about their vision for the future, but they lack the ability to voice their demand for support to implement their solutions; support organizations (governmental, non-governmental and private) are not providing services matching the needs and demands of communal livestock farmers; and frame conditions (e.g. land tenure) are not conducive to sustainable rangeland use and improved livestock production practices.

These findings led to the elaboration of the SARDEP strategy with emphasis on three areas of involvement: to establish and build the capability of community-based organizations to enable them to identify and prioritize their problems, seek solutions and formulate their demands so that they can successfully negotiate with any possible support institution to implement solutions; to help support institutions reorientate their services to match the needs of communal farmers, and also to strengthen the capacity of the Ministry of Agriculture, Water and Rural Development for development work in communal areas; and to contribute to policy formulation and promote the creation of a policy framework conducive to sustainable natural resource management.

Closing the gap

To implement its strategy SARDEP needed to qualify its staff to act as facilitators, information brokers, negotiators and mediators. Technical know-how about livestock and range management was considered less important in selecting staff than the ability to be accepted and to work with people. The investment in human resource development has had a tremendous effect on the performance of the SARDEP implementation team. To qualify staff for assuming those functions, much training, coaching and guidance have been given. Training included participatory rural appraisal, advanced training for workshop moderation, goal-oriented project planning and exposure to similar or related programmes and projects.

Field staff are highly motivated. They elaborate and implement their own workplans. Annual workplans, which are elaborated jointly, give overall guidance and ensure that all work is orientated toward objectives. Quarter meetings are organized for all SARDEP staff to evaluate progress made and to agree on how to proceed. These regular meetings provide opportunities for participatory reporting, reviewing and replanning.

The approach developed by SARDEP is not the blueprint strategy found in textbooks. In principle it is an approach that facilitates and supports a process aimed at building the capacity of community-based organizations (CBOs) to be recognized and become involved as strong partners in the development process. Since development also involves service delivery institutions, CBOs need to be able to present their cases and to negotiate for support so that they can maintain control of developmental actions.

Meanwhile, CBOs have implemented, with support of service institutions, a number of their own projects, such as building and rehabilitating small earth dams, growing

management practices. A prerequisite for success is the empowerment of the local communities to assume or resume responsibility for managing their own resources. Community involvement in the development process must be given highest priority to achieve the desired level of success.

SARDEP moved away from the practice of controlling the development approach and developing technical packages and offering them to the communities (input approach). Rather, SARDEP developed the negotiation approach, a process that enables subsistence farmers and their community-based organizations to devise their own solutions to their problems and, where necessary, to negotiate more support from relevant service institutions on issues which are outside farmer capacities. The success or failure of SARDEP will at the end be measured in how far farmers and service institutions are able to 'close the gap' between themselves and working in partnership together, and the extent to which farmers can solve their own problems in a sustainable way without SARDEP's involvement.

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