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NATIONAL CONFERENCE ON LAND REFORM AND THE LAND QUESTION

-AN ENVIRONMENTAL PERSPECTIVE

land one

The people are hungry, hungry for land. And this land hunger will be one of the main issues debated at the Land Reform conference from the 25th of this month to the 28th.

The conference will draw a wide range of people from all over the country to decide on how land in Namibia should be allocated, how it should be owned and how it should be used.

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 all Namibians are well aware that 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 so that when once hundreds of thousands of tonnes of fish were caught, recent quotas are measured in tens of thousands.

Many farmers have thought only of short term gain, and overgrazing over much of the commercial farmland has led to widespread bush encroachment and degradation of rangeland. 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 deforestation of this region has often been remarked upon by Namibians returning to the area after long periods of exile.

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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.

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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.

Namibia has a dream. And that dream is to one day be 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.

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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.

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.

\* The second article in this two-part series will look at alternative forms of land-use which can contribute to development without ruining the environmental base on which development depends.



LAND REFORM - AN ENVIRONMENTAL PERSPECTIVE

Part two

The people are waiting, waiting for land. And it is expected that some answers will be given at the land reform conference to be held from June 25 to 28.

Among those waiting for answers are environmentalists, who are eager to see the outcome of the conference to assess what impacts and opportunities the descisions will have on the land question and the natural resources of the country.

But what exactly do environmentalists want? Do they wish to guard the land solely to propagate wild animal populations, with no consideration given to the needs of the people?

This is unfortunately the view held by many people about conservation. But it is an incorrect view. Conservation is not aimed at protecting areas and animals to the detriment of people.

Environmentalists believe the land reform conference will have 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 multi-sectional approach.

Modern conservation theory and experience recognises the need to intergrate the management of natural resources with community development in order to improve the quality of life of man.

Conservation must involve and benefit local communities. The development pathways that hold promise are those that make intelligent use of locally available, renewable resources.

Each community and region can find ways for substantially improving the quality of life for its people. This is possible by basing development on locally sustainable land-use practices and building from indigenous knowledge and skills.

Cross-sectional and multi-disciplinary regional land-use planning is thus needed to fully intergrate sustainable human development with natural resource planning.

Such planning will only be successful, however, if local communities have fully participated in the process, and have real descision-making power.

Land-use planning aims to provide a framework in which environmental management and development are integrated to provide the best long-term opportunities to people while retaining the natural resources in a healthy and productive condition.

This means that certain guiding principles apply:

- o the re-empowerment of local communities so that they are fully involved in regional planning and have the power and authority to make decisions about the sustainable use of natural resources
- o the creation of institutions for the community to be involved in decision-making and consultation with the authorities. These structures should be elected and non-political, have legal status and power, have regional flexibility and should attend to planning and management of natural resources, land-use options and land allocation.
- o three levels of consultation and participation are needed, involving all members of the community at:
  - a. grassroots level
  - b. regional level
  - c. inter-ministerial level
- o self-sustainability of resources, funding and expertise.
- o Rights for local decision-making with regard to natural resources and within a geographically defined area should include decisions on land and resource allocation and utilization. Rights of access to, and utilization of resources should be linked to individual responsibility for their wise and sustainable use. Individuals should be responsible to the appropriate institution which should have powers of sanction in the case of abuse.
- o People should benefit from holding certain rights of access to, and utilization of natural resources. These benefits should not be seen as rewards for good behaviour but as earnings from well-managed communal enterprises. The community must then decide how to distribute these benefits.
- o Legislation should be implemented allowing the Ministry of Wildlife, Conservation and Tourism to devolve authority over natural resources to local institutions. This legislation should allow real decision-making power to be transferable to communities and for them to derive direct benefits for the use of natural resources including wildlife.

There are a number of simple and inexpensive ways in which the people of Namibia can implement natural resource projects that are sustainable and that provide very good benefits to local communities, the private sector and Government.

A working example exists in West Caprivi. Initiated by the Ministry of Wildlife, Conservation and Tourism, the project began with a multi-disciplinary socio-economic survey to identify the people in the area to determine their lifestyles and to incorporate their views and opinions into the survey.

The survey also aimed to identify and quantify the resource base and any critical factors such as sensitive components and threatened species that would need to be taken into account.

There are a wide range of land use options suitable for the region. These include agriculture, subsistence hunting, fishing, collecting veld food and building materials, tourism, commercial photography, sport and trophy fishing, capture and sale of live game, game cropping and trophy hunting.

The greater the diversity of land practices, the more secure and robust is the resulting economy. The development of tourism and local photography, organised by the community, the state and the private sector, could derive about R662 500 for the community annually. The state would receive about R662 500 while the profit to the private sector would be about R270 000. The development of a wildlife-based industry could generate about R904 000 from the sale of live game, and about R1 910 000 could be derived from game cropping and trophy hunting.

The survey revealed that the community of West Caprivi could earn about R2,57 million, the state about R1,91 million, while private enterprise could gain about R0,43 million from the area every year.

At the moment the area generates no income but requires considerable expenditure to support the local community. Similar resource-based programmes benefitting local communities are equally appropriate and possible in most other regions of Namibia.

Consider the prospects involved in the tourist industry - the fourth largest industry in Namibia.



Overseas tourists are looking for new, relatively unexplored areas to visit. And Namibia, with its dramatic scenery, unique desert, riverine forests, large variety of wildlife and open spaces could become a favourite tourist destination if it is marketed successfully - and if the population can deliver what the tourists want. Not only do people want to visit Namibia's parks and reserves, but they are also interested in seeing Namibia as it is, and meeting and learning about the Namibian people.

This creates an opportunity for communal and commercial farmers to develop attractions and facilities on their farms, thereby benefiting along with the big businesses from tourism. Not only can people encourage visitors to visit farms and communal areas, but a home-industry in curios and various services can be developed.

In Damaraland, three curio shops have been set up and a lively sale of locally produced curios has resulted. This project was initiated by the Save the Rhino Trust and it is possible for people in other regions to start similar projects.

The Nature Conservation Ordinance makes provision for trophy hunting to take place if certain conditions are met. Tourists flock to Namibia annually to hunt animals, and are prepared to pay high fees to do so. Such activities should benefit not only the commercial farmers but also communities on state lands.

Hotels, shops and curio stands benefit from the presence of such tourists.

In marginal areas like Damaraland and the Namib, sheep, cattle and even goats battle to survive, but game prospers - and there is very little upkeep.

So it is possible to develop game management areas where stock farming is difficult.

In addition, it is also possible - and many farmers in Namibia are currently practicing this - to practice mixed farming. This entails the farming of stock while making provision for wildlife, so that both co-exist. In Namibia, where droughts are the norm rather than the exception, it is wise not to put all ones eggs into one basket. Therefore, by diversifying and by farming game and livestock, the farmer has a backup income.

In other areas where elephants and hippos are a problem and interfere with crops, the transfer of ownership or custodianship of these resources into the hands of the local community would bring about a change in view associated with financial advantages.

The community could manage these resources and gain the benefits from tourism and controlled hunting and cropping thereby giving these animals commercial value to people living in rural communal areas.

Once a commodity has value, it is looked after and managed for optimal gain.

In this way, Namibia needs to evaluate the natural capital of the country.

This means looking at the basic assets provided by the environment - soils, fresh waters, potential for agriculture, fishery and forestry, wild species, importance for crop breeding and medicine, areas valuable for tourism etc.

Once an overall picture has been drawn, we can then sit down and plan the land-use practices for the different regions of the country.

These may include areas best suited for industry, housing, intensive agriculture, livestock, mixed domestic stock with game, tourist areas, hunting areas and buffer zones.

It could also include areas not used by people at all which could be used for scientific controls.

The planning for optimal and sustainable use is important to ensure that resources are used wisely so that future generations may benefit.

From here, the land must be monitored to ensure that policies are adjusted to suit changes which may occur.

In addition, it is important to work for cooperation between nations and communities. Namibia should not isolate itself in planning its environmental future. Plans for trans-border management areas are needed, particularly where river systems or wetlands are concerned, where game migrations are cut off by international fences and where joint management between countries can lead to the respective areas having a larger resource base.

Namibians must consider how the natural resources in the different parts of the country can be used to develop sound lifestyles and economies that will be viable for our children and their children. We must now plan for the future generations of Namibians.