
Namibia's Land Reform Process: Which Way Forward?

- A Scenario Approach -

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The issue (1)

- Distribution & ownership of land is an unresolved challenge on Namibia's domestic political agenda until today.
- Namibia's land reform policies continue to be permanently under discussion - a never ending story, as it seems.

The issue (2)

- NRP: a socio-political zero-sum game incapable of creating sustainable livelihoods for poor people.
- AALS: an uneconomical way of subsidising the acquisition of commercial farms mainly by the new political elite.

The issue (3)

- No shortage of studies and recommendations that have been produced over the years by experts/non-state-actors
- As latest initiative, the Permanent Technical Team (PTT) - a team of 'embedded experts' - worked out a number of recommendations.

The questions

- How will government implement (expert) recommendations which seek to improve land policies?
- Which other factors have to be taking into account by estimating their chances of implementation?

The research

- Qualitative research based on expert interviews.
- Ten expert interviews in Windhoek, in the time between 10.05. and 08.06.2006.

The way: Scenarios

- Developing a base scenario to focus on the predictable future of land reform
- Development of 4 different scenarios to focus on different possible ways of future development.
- To highlight the determinants/ necessary conditions for each scenario.

The base scenario

- A: A violent land reform like that one in Zimbabwe can almost certainly be excluded.
- B: Land reform policies based on strictly economic criteria are also highly unlikely.
- C: Government is not willing to acknowledge own mistakes.
- D: Land reform is an inadequate tool to reduce poverty.

A: No Zimbabwe scenario in Namibia.

- The base of SWAPO's political power - Ovamboland - is not comparable to Mashonaland, the heart of ZANU's power (It has never been affected by colonial land grab).
- The land hunger of the political elite has already been satisfied.
- Past & current practices of land expropriation show some respect for the rule of law.

B: No reform based on pure economic principles.

- The land issue is a result of historical injustice and highly racially charged.
- The land issue is therefore for the majority of people an emotional issue; access to land is still regarded as way out of poverty and misery.
- Politicians and the government use the land issue as political trump card during elections.

C: Government will never blame itself.

- Very weak capacity to openly accept even justified criticism within Government & the ruling party (partly undermining ability to learn from own mistakes).
- The higher public criticism, the lower Government's willingness to change (failed) policies.
- Government needs to find ways to present external ideas as their own ideas.

D: Redistributing commercial farm land doesn't contribute to poverty reduction.

- The semi-arid character of the land restricts the agricultural potential (yield) and severely limits the number of people that can live off the land
- Commercial farming in Namibia requires a lot of skills and capital, which the poor do not have - and cannot easily acquire (on their own).
- Over-use of land is likely to cause permanent ecological damage.

First
Scenario:

Derailment of
land reform
process

Second
Scenario:

Policy learning
of political
elites

Third
Scenario:

Loss of
interest

Fourth
Scenario:

Ethnical
conflict over
new injustices

Base Scenario

First scenario: Derailment

Ten years after the PTT process, land reform is largely marked by the expropriation of commercial farm land. Although the legal framework was by and large respected, a lack of transparency and accountability was obvious. 'National interest' as reason for expropriation was used as a stereotype pretext in case of any expropriation.

First scenario: Derailment

The population of Namibia - in particular the rural poor - are disappointed with the results of land reform. Where land reform has taken place, poverty persists.

Populist politicians step up the situation by inflammatory, anti-colonial rhetoric and get more and more support by the people. Conflicts between the rural poor and white commercial farmers are on the increase.

First scenario: How is it possible?

- A lacklustre economic growth coupled with high unemployment/ widespread poverty and the remaining unequal distribution of income and wealth continue to pose a serious political risk.
- Desperate and marginalized people become increasingly open for political manipulation and populist rhetoric. Unscrupulous elements among younger politicians are trying to benefit from the situation for career purposes

First scenario: How is it possible?

- The political atmosphere towards land and land reform in the region is heating up. A new “fast-track” land-reform in RSA coupled with a more radical rhetoric has been announced in South Africa, leading to calls for similar policies in Namibia. The Zimbabwean lesson has been forgotten.

First scenario: How is it possible?

- Politicians are not tying themselves to more narrow and precise criteria in terms of goals, beneficiaries, modes of delivery of land reform - as that would limit their possibilities of using land reform as an (arbitrary) political and patronage tool.
- As a result, the practical outcome of the land reform continues to be highly disappointing, leading to more and more frustration while expectations remain high.

First scenario: How is it possible?

- The respect for the rule of law and the legal process diminishes gradually within the political class. At the same time, the quality and impartiality of the legal system gradually diminishes as well, both leading to increased arbitrariness in the way expropriation and land redistribution is handled.
- Supporters of expropriation maintain, that reasons for expropriation do not have to be clear - that it is a democratic government's prerogative to handle the reform process as it sees fit.

Second Scenario: Policy Learning

Through close co-operation of all ministries involved, the NRP has been transformed into a integrated concept of rural development. AALS has been adjusted to take into account the possible yield of sustainable farming skills and the farming of emerging farmers. Proper support services (training, agricultural extension) are available to emerging farmers. Selective expropriations and joint ventures complete the creation of integrated rural areas.

Second Scenario (cont.)

However, land reform was not able to reduce rural poverty as much as expected and promised by politics years ago.

Policy-makers reacted on this potential frustration early, by lowering expectations of the general public and the poor to more realistic levels.

Second Scenario: How is it possible?

- Faced personally with the realities of commercial farming, the political elite underwent a process of self learning. Already today a lot of part-time farmers need to subsidise their farms with their first income from other sources.
- As a result, the general believe, that land ownership causes wealth automatically, loses its validity.

Second Scenario: How is it possible?

- The PTT-process helped the government to implement recommendations without having to admit the failure of own former land policies.
- Solid economic growth, distribution of wealth and more employment in the formal sector reduce the pressure on Government and weakens the power of political opportunism with regard to the land reform process.

Third Scenario: Loss of interest

The current practise of land reform is not been changed at all. The implementation of (PTT-) recommendations is limited to rhetoric statements. Over the years, the amount of land distributed per year decreases rapidly.

Inside government a new generation of young, urban and educated politicians who regard rural life and investment in land reform as backward are getting more and more influential..

Third Scenario (cont.)

The land issue as a political issue is losing importance. More than half of all Namibians are born after independence – for most of the “born-frees” the first individual priority is a job in town, not a piece of land.

Consequently, land reform/land redistribution is no longer a suitable tool for election campaigning and political mobilisation

Third Scenario: How is it possible?

- The change of generations also changes the perception of land within society - those ones born after independence do no longer regard access to land as key to economic prosperity and to correct historical injustices.
- Already today land reform is described as still relevant, but an issue of only minor importance which is only intensively discussed in public during election time.

Third Scenario: How is it possible?

- The new preferences of a new generation are underpinned by sustained economic growth coupled with more employment, more education and more equal distribution of wealth.
- Only by that a new generation will be immune in face of populist political opportunism.

Third Scenario: How is it possible?

- As a result, politicians also loose interest in the issue. In addition, the ‘rational’ and rather technocratic recommendations of the PTT, like for example the idea of joint ventures between white commercial farmers and black emerging farmers, also don’t have much appeal for politicians. They smack of political comprise instead of political power.

Fourth Scenario: Ethnical conflict

Government & the ruling party are using land purely as a tool of political patronage towards their core constituencies (Oshivambo-speaking people, war veterans, etc). Land distribution becomes increasingly an issue of ethnical strife. In particular Otjihereros complain that people from the North are settled on commercial farms in their traditional areas and perceive land reform as a second colonialisaton of their land.

Ethnical conflicts increasingly displace class conflicts between the advantaged and the disadvantaged.

Fourth Scenario: How is it possible?

- Already the historical land conference in 1991 decided, that a restitution of original land ownership is impossible because of complex social changes. This decision however contains potential for ethnical conflict which is not discussed until today.
- The political class, dominated by Oshivambo-speaking Namibians, uses the non-ethnicity argument opportunistically because in other policy areas it does rely on ethnic loyalty.

Fourth Scenario: How is it possible?

- International critic on the land reform as a measure of tribal patronage is refused as an attempt to undermine national unity in Namibia.
- Countervailing forces which could change the conflict about land from a race or ethnicity-based issue into a class-based one (e.g. a new social movement of landless people) remain weak or non-existent.

Conclusion (1)

- The future economic development of Namibia and the land policies in other countries in the region , especially South Africa, are key factors (and perhaps the single most important ones). How these factors will develop, is, of course, not clearly predictable.
- Most experts concur, that government is interested in a land reform without narrow and precise goals, beneficiaries and modes of delivery to maintain it as a tool in case of critical elections and conflicts of power in future.

Conclusion (2)

- The PTT-process was a success in so far, as it facilitated government to implement external suggestions under the label “we further improved”.
- Policy learning and more public debate on the land reform issue is only possible, if the failure of government’s former policies doesn’t become too obvious in public.
- Ethnic conflicts seem to be unlikely because of the numerical dominance of Oshivambo-speaking Namibians.

Loss of interest

Derailment

?

Ethnical conflicts

Policy learning

**Please give your comments,
opinions and criticism!**