

# **The Future of a Nation: Balancing Perspectives on Development and Social Justice – The Land Issue in Independent Namibia, 1991**

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## Abstract

The purpose of this case is to familiarize students with some of the social, cultural, political, and economic transitions that Namibia has been experiencing since its independence in 1990. The case demonstrates the deep and lasting effects that hundreds of years of colonialism have had on many periphery countries, especially on Namibia. The current land issue in Namibia reflects the difficulties and complexities around the process of reconciliation and the redistribution of resources. Specifically, there is much debate among Namibians about how the country's land should be redistributed and developed after independence. Furthermore, different groups have conflicting opinions about what role the government should play in this process.

In this case, the federal government has called for a convention in Windhoek, the capital of Namibia, to allow different parties to discuss some of the possible courses of action for land reform in Namibia. These groups include a rural farmers organization, a commercial farmers organization, a non-government organization that focuses on women, and an elder council within a Lutheran organization.

Upon reading and role playing this case, students should begin to have a better understanding of Namibia's history, the pervasive effects of colonialism, the relationship between power and resources, and the difficult and complex problems that young independent democracies face. Students should also learn to recognize that there are no absolute answers to the social and economic dilemmas which have a profound effect on people's everyday lives. Issues, such as the one presented in this case, require both understanding and compromise.

## Historical Background on Land in Namibia

Traditional Namibian agriculture was characterized by pastoral methods. Specifically, different indigenous groups, including the San, Herero, Damara, and Ovambo people, traveled freely over the country's lands with their livestock as they used up the water and grazing capacity of one area and moved on to the next. Namibians managed to preserve this style of farming and land use for hundreds of years despite the influence of early European explorers and missionaries from the late fifteenth century through the late nineteenth century.

However, during the early 1800's the tensions between Namibians and Europeans escalated and a state of war broke out between Namibia and Germany. After several years of armed struggle and thousands of deaths, Germany conquered Namibia. In 1884 at the Berlin Conference, the colonization of Namibia by Germany was formally legitimized and the valuable communal land was privatized by German settlers. German colonial rule devastated the Namibian people and their cultures. Specifically, the Germans took the communal land from the people of Namibia and made it illegal for Namibians to own cattle. This decision was strategic on part of the Germans as the indigenous people not only lost a valued and integral part of their cultures and identities, but were also forced to work for the Germans in order to survive. German colonists exploited two of the country's most valued resources, diamond mining and cattle raising. Moreover, the Germans exploited the indigenous people

as they forced many male Namibians to become migrant contract laborers and work in the mines.

Indigenous resistance to these changes was met by brutal German forces and almost entire groups of indigenous people were massacred by the Germans, including the San and Herero people of Namibia. As thousands of Namibians were killed, the number of Germans living in Namibia and the amount of farmable land that they owned increased dramatically. For example, from 1903 to 1913 the white population in Namibia rose from 3,701 to 14,840 and their farmland increased from 4.8 to 13.4 hectares.

With the Second World War and the defeat of the German army by the South African Army, the control of Namibia changed hands and the South African regime over Namibia began. Under Afrikaner rule and the introduction of apartheid to Namibia, the blacks in Namibia suffered from the same laws and restrictions that affected blacks in South Africa. Thus, Namibia became even more divided by race as tribal homelands for specific indigenous groups were established and groups of people were forced to move out of their homesteads to more arid and marginalized places. White Afrikaner farmers began to dominate the better agricultural land and establish commercial farming, while black Namibians were forced to farm the less fertile land in their traditional communal ways.

A great resistance movement gradually developed among Namibians in response to South African domination. The freedom struggle in Namibia against South African rule began in the early 1970's and lasted nearly twenty years. The resistance movement was led by the South West African People's Organization (SWAPO). The armed struggle involved all ethnic groups, but was predominantly led by the Ovambo people of northern Namibia. SWAPO demanded independence from South Africa as they wanted to end the horrors and inhumanity of the apartheid regime and establish a democracy, repossessing their land, power, and identities.

Namibia won its independence in 1990. However, despite this great achievement, the new democratic government under the elected SWAPO party and President Sam Njoma faced many challenges to reconcile the past and encourage development in Namibia. SWAPO was especially interested in improving education, implementing English as the national language, attracting foreign investors, introducing technology to the country, and promoting economic development in Namibia. SWAPO also felt pressure to create a national sense of identity while respecting ethnic differences. Moreover, the party understood the need to recognize and address the interests of all Namibians, not just those who supported SWAPO during the liberation struggle or the Ovambo population, who is the most represented indigenous group in the SWAPO party. Several years after independence, despite formal political changes, little had changed in terms of the economic realities of the majority of Namibian's everyday lives. Specifically, the land was still very much unequally divided as the white minority owned more of the valuable land and the black majority owned very little of the less productive land.

Consequently, land distribution was recognized by the new democratic government under the leadership of SWAPO as a serious issue. Thus, "The National Conference on Land Reform and the Land Question" was established and held in the national capital of Windhoek. The country was deeply concerned over the gross economic disparity in Namibia and saw land reform as a means to reduce poverty and economic inequality in Namibia.

Many different perspectives on the issue were represented as several groups convened to discuss the possibilities for this land reform. These participants included delegates from a rural farmers association who advocated land redistribution and traditional communal farming, delegates from a commercial farmers association who felt that land

reform and communal farming was not viable for economic development in Namibia, representatives from Sister Namibia, a non government organization concerned with women's issues and women's exclusion from both communal and commercial agriculture, and elder representatives from a Lutheran church organization who feared cultural marginalization.

#### Spokesperson for the Rural Farmers Association

As members of the Rural Farmers Association, indigenous Namibians, and SWAPO members, we are deeply concerned about future land reform in Namibia. Many of us fought and sacrificed for independence. However, we still struggle everyday to survive in an environment which is underdeveloped and not relieving us from our economic plight. We feel that our sacrifice and participation in the liberation movement was meaningless since democracy and freedom mean nothing without economic liberation. We are still marginalized, impoverished, and alienated from our cultures and traditions. Land reform will help alleviate the gross imbalance of wealth that plagues Namibia. Moreover, redistributing the land will allow Namibians to regain a sense of cultural identity as we can begin to practice communal farming as our ancestors did and begin to heal after years of strife.

We do not feel that we are asking for anything that is not rightfully ours. Namibia's land and resources have been monopolized by outsiders for hundreds of years. We simply feel that we deserve the land that was taken from us. It is the least any humane person would do as whites have not only killed our people, but disrupted our families, our culture, and our sense of identity. We deserve compensation for hundreds of years of inhumanity and marginalization.

Our moral reasons for land redistribution runs deep, but we feel that there are economic incentives for land reform as well. Specifically, land reform will decrease the gross economic disparity in Namibia. People may not gain excessive wealth from communal agriculture. However, significantly fewer people will be living in shantytowns or in other extremely impoverished conditions as people will have more productive land to work. Commercial farming will only help those who already have some degree of wealth and those who have access to it. Commercial agriculture will not benefit the truly marginalized and impoverished.

We demand formal recognition and a statement of apology from the Afrikaner people and the South African regime which is responsible for countless acts of inhumanity and domination. We also feel that the indigenous groups who especially suffered under the regime, specifically the Herero and San people, should receive special consideration.

Secondly, we feel that Namibian land reform should force white farmers to relinquish their land to the indigenous people of Namibia. In 1990 Namibia won its independence and expressed its values and promises to the country's people in the democratic constitution of Namibia. Article 23 of this constitution explains the government's responsibility to its historically disadvantaged people. Specifically, the article reads:

“Nothing...shall prevent Parliament from enacting legislation providing directly or indirectly for the advancement of persons within Namibia who have been socially, economically or educationally disadvantaged by past discriminatory practices, or for the implementation of policies or programs aimed at redressing social, economic or educational imbalances in the Namibian society arising out of past discriminatory laws or practices...”

We argue that this directly applies to the current land situation in Namibia and that the government has a responsibility to its people and to counteracting the consequences of past discriminatory laws and practices.

#### Spokesperson for the Commercial Farmers Association

As members of the Commercial Farmers Association we understand and sympathize with the advocates for communal farming who are both indigenous Namibians and SWAPO members. However, we do not feel that dramatic land reform and a return to communal practices is in the best interest of Namibia as a newly democratic and developing country. Namibia's chief concern right now is economic development and modernization. Our country needs to attract foreign investors and increase the technology and capital in Namibia. Reverting back to traditional agriculture does not define a place for us in the global economy or promote national economic development.

The past is full of injustices and horrors. We recognize the social injustices that whites have inflicted on black Namibians. However, the majority of these atrocities were performed by our ancestors, not us. The more recent racial hostility by white Afrikaners, including some advocates of commercial farming, was in defense of our property and way of life. Our families have owned this land for over a hundred years and we feel that it belongs as much to us now as indigenous Namibians believe it belongs to them. The privileges we, as whites, gained under German and South African rule were legitimate under those regimes and, thus, cannot be discredited in the present. Furthermore, we believe that forcing us off our land now is to do the same thing that our ancestors did to the indigenous peoples of Namibia.

Most importantly, we feel that commercial farming is more beneficial to the economic development of Namibia. The kind of traditional communal agriculture that the Rural Farmers Association is advocating is not efficient or productive. Specifically, communal farming exploits water and grazing resources and, thus, cannot be beneficial to national development. Moreover, we feel that commercial farming has great potential to promote economic growth for the whole nation as it will introduce new technologies and employment opportunities. The distribution of wealth may be disproportionate in the beginning, but at the end of the day the entire nation will benefit from the growth of commercial agriculture. We Afrikaners know how to do this as we have years of experience under our belts. Although we are white, we are nevertheless citizens of Namibia and we urge that future land reform preserve commercial farming as it is economically best for our country in the long run.

#### Spokesperson from Sister Namibia, a Non-Government Women's Organization

We are here at this convention to ensure that Namibian women's issues and concerns about the future of land in Namibia are no longer marginalized. We feel that it is very telling that no women's organizations were invited to this meeting. While, the new democratic Namibian government has addressed specific women's issues like family planning, it has failed to involve women directly in issues which have previously only concerned men.

With that said, we would like to express our concerns about the land question in Namibia. We struggle to identify our perspective on the issue because we feel a responsibility to all women of Namibia. We represent both rural and urban women, as well as traditional and progressive women. Furthermore, we represent black women and those white women who agree with and participate in our social, political, and economic agendas. Thus, we are

advocating for the inclusion of women in both communal and commercial agriculture. Whether or not one style of farming dominates or the government establishes a way for the two to coexist, we feel that women need to be included on every level of society, including the ownership and control of land and property .

Traditionally, women in Namibia have had equally respected roles in the homestead. Furthermore, when the Germans forced many Namibian men to migrate and work in the mines, women were left in control of the family, the cattle, and the land. Yet, land inheritance was and continues to be patriarchal. Presently, the democratic government under SWAPO has created policies of gender equality and established the Ministry of Women's Affairs. However, in reality little change has occurred for our Namibian sisters on many levels, including the land issue. Women have no legal or formal control of the land they work. And young women are forced to travel to coastal cities, like Swapkamd, and work in Export Processing Zones as the arid land they work does not provide well enough for their families.

Thus, land reform and traditional communal farming needs to be redefined in a more inclusive way. As female headed households represent a large number of families in rural Namibia, women should hold a proportionate amount of power within the rural homesteads and communal areas. Furthermore, women need to be able to participate and be active members in organizations like the Rural Farmers Association.

Namibia also needs to be critical of commercial agriculture. The economic benefits from commercial farming such as an increased level of technology and more job opportunities need to be accessible to women as well as men. Moreover, the government should provide incentives and training for women's involvement in such economic arenas, as well as regulate the working conditions of these farming industries.

As Namibian women, we fought alongside our brothers in the liberation struggle and sacrificed just as much as Namibian men. We feel that it is only fair that women benefit equally from whatever land reform occurs in Namibia.

#### Elder Council of a Lutheran Church Organization

As Christians, elder Namibian citizens, and representatives of Herero, Damara, and Ovambo people, we are fearful about the direction that Namibia is taking as a developing country. Too many young Namibians are too eager to adopt Western practices and beliefs. They easily reject our culture, traditions, and heritage in order to participate in a more modern economy. For example, we do not agree with how many Namibian women have embraced Sister Namibia's feminist agenda which empowers women in characteristically white, Western, unAfrican ways. We do not like how feminism is encouraging women to demand powerful positions in the church. The traditions and structure of our religion are being transformed by unAfrican, Western ideas. We are deeply worried that our culture is eroding and that when we pass on and go to heaven, there will be no one to carry on our cultural traditions and way of life.

We agree with the Rural Farmers Association in that the government should take responsibility for land reform and force the white Afrikaners to relinquish their land. We also believe that the land was taken by force from our ancestors and is rightfully ours. However, unlike the advocates for communal agriculture, we recognize that some aspects of European influence have been beneficial to our country. Specifically, white missionaries educated us, taught us to believe in Jesus Christ, and encouraged us to live in civilized and Christian ways. We can never forget what the Lutheran missionaries did for the Namibian people.

Lastly, we feel that the land issue in Namibia is essentializing the country's indigenous people. The advocates for rural, communal farming are failing to recognize our ethnic differences. While, independence has encouraged us to develop a greater sense of a unified, national identity, the new democratic government under SWAPO has been too eager to solidify all the indigenous groups. The advocates for rural, communal farming are not recognizing the differences between the different ethnic groups. The policies and educational reform promoting Namibia's adoption of English as the national language exemplifies the threat of cultural obliteration. What will happen to our indigenous languages when English is taught in schools and used more and more with each generation in daily life? We fear that language reform is indicative of the kind of land reform that could be implemented in Namibia. As respected Christian elders, we feel threatened by some of the ramifications of independence as our uniqueness is being ignored by national policies.

#### Questions for Discussion

After hearing each of the group's viewpoints, is it possible for the federal government to establish some sort of reconciliation or compromise on the land issue in Namibia? How does the government balance each groups valid concerns about preserving the different cultures in Namibia, while at the same time implement policy that will encourage the economic development of the nation as a whole?