

A case for prioritising rural development in Namibia

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SUMMARY

Spatial planning, in most developing countries, is conducted without recourse to the needs of rural areas. This means that the visions and strategies for rural areas are ignored due to a one-sided focus on urban problems. As this may be good for urban dwellers, rural areas are suffocating as they often face significant land challenges as well. This paper opposes the one-sided discussion on urbanization in Namibia. It argues that rural development should be viewed as a means of empowering and capacitating individuals with rural inhabitants by distributing resources and materials. Access to assets such as (land and water), market services, especially ensuring that the living conditions of rural people are improved. One of the causes of rural poverty has been identified as a lack of social services and education, as rural people are separated from the mainstream of the national economy. Bias, inequality, and unequal distribution of resources are still prevalent in rural communities as opposed to urban areas. This paper presents an overview and analysis of Namibia's rural development, by focusing on how rural neglect hinders development of rural areas in Gibeon, Namibia. It primarily focuses on the developmental difficulties encountered in rural areas in Namibia and presents evidence of how Namibia's rural areas have been neglected, preventing their development. The study offers recommendations for enhancing Namibia's rural development in its final section.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Rural areas are the pinnacle for countries' development, supporting the urban with agricultural products and, for many in Africa, a solid link between ancestors and family land. Governments for the last decade have been supporting the development of rural areas through the provision of services such as water and sanitation. However, this has not been enough to curb migration to urban areas. More so, the rural areas are now seen as placeholders for the expansion of urban areas, especially in Northern Namibia. According to Wiggins and Proctor (2002) rural areas continue to be characterized by a relative wealth of natural resources, distance, and a relatively high cost of moving around despite on-going transformation. Rural development ensures society's modernization and transformation from traditional isolation to integration with the national economy (Francis & David, 2012). To achieve sustainable development, a developing country's development strategies must devote much of its resources to rural development, which is frequently based on agricultural growth (Nji, 1981).

The notion of rural development has generated much debate, according to Francis & David (2012). From one perspective to another, rural development is defined differently. Furthermore, as the processes and aims of development have changed over time, the meaning of rural development has also changed (Francis & David, 2012). For this paper, a definition provided in Namibia's National Rural Development Strategy 2013/14 – 2017/18 has been adopted; rural development is defined as "actions aimed to improve rural people's standard of living by providing basic social and economic services and empower them through the creation of political, legal, economic and social environment" (Republic of Namibia, 2013).

According to Salom and Khumalo (2022), Namibia is one of the world's most sparsely inhabited countries, with a population of 2.3 million people living on 842,000 square kilometres of land in one of Sub-Saharan Africa's driest locations. Rural areas comprise around 51 percent of Namibia's population (Salom & Khumalo, 2022). However, for the past years, there has been an overwhelming focus on urban development in Namibia, mainly by the primary development stakeholders interested in and have activities related to rural development, such as the government and local and international development practitioners. This focus on urban development deemphasized the significance of rural areas in the country.

This paper provides an overview and analysis of Namibia's rural development state. It specifically focuses on the developmental challenges faced in rural areas across the country; it further presents a case study of how the neglect of rural areas has hindered the development of rural areas in Namibia. Finally, the paper concludes by providing recommendations on improving rural development in Namibia.

2. The state of rural development in Namibia

Since gaining its independence, Namibia has significantly encouraged rural development. The Namibian administration has dealt with numerous political, economic, and social issues. As a result, the range of possible sources of income for some households has increased, providing them with more opportunity to experiment with innovative strategies (Kamwi et al. 2018). Despite the continuous efforts of all stakeholders and advancement in many spheres, major issues still need to be addressed. These development issues are complex, therefore when addressing these issues, one must recognize the complexity and dynamism. The improvements in rural residents' livelihoods have occurred against the background of a forceful colonization. The colonial conflicts caused a significant portion of the inhabitants in the country's centre and south to perish or be driven to the north or east. The period of apartheid that followed brought additional segregation, oppression, and marginalization of the black and coloured populations (Wiechers, n.d). Therefore, urban development is intricately bound to rural development. Even with the current focus on urban development, rural areas are still home to a large population of Namibian (Ottolenghi & Watson, 2010). Therefore, it is imperative to productively stabilize communities through improved rural development. Namibia's rural development will be evaluated regarding policy, food security, access to essential services, land availability and employment and rural economic development.

2.1 Rural development related policies and legal frameworks

Rural development has been emphasized in various legal framework in Namibia, these include the National Development Plans, Vision 2030, Communal Land Reform Act No.5 of 2002, Harambee Prosperity Plan and the Rural Development Policy and Strategy. However, this paper will focus only on the National Rural Development Policy and Strategy. The Ministry of Urban and Rural Development (MURD) launched the National Rural Development Policy and Strategy in 2012. Since then, the Ministry and various stakeholders have been implementing programmes and projects in rural areas in line with the National Rural Development Policy and Strategy. The overall objective of the policy is to ensure a systematic, integrated and coordinated planning and implementation of development in rural areas to improve the livelihood of people living in rural communities. The policy identified the following strategic approaches in effort to address rural development

- a. Coordination and integration of rural development action
- b. People's empowerment and civic participation
- c. Rural infrastructure and services development
- d. Environmental protection and sustainable use of natural resources
- e. Social welfare services
- f. Support to rural agriculture
- g. Sustainable rural economic development

Despite the objectives of the policy and approaches put in place to achieve these objectives, some rural areas in Namibia still face major challenges such as hunger, poverty and little to no access to basic services.

2.2 Food security

Food security remains a top development priority and global concern as enshrined in the Sustainable Development Goal 2 of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (Conceição, Levine, Lipton & Warren-Rodríguez, 2016). Since access to and entitlement to food are necessary for bolstering fundamental human skills, food security is thus a key element of the paradigm of human development and capability (Conceição et. al., 2016). Between October-November 2021, approximately 659 000 people (26% of the population) across Namibia were facing food insecurity (The Integrated Food Security Phase Classification, 2021). Over the past years Namibian regions have been prone to drought, with the national government declaring it a national disaster in 2016. Drought and floods are major drivers of food insecurity in Namibia's rural areas. In addition, these areas experience abnormal dry spells receiving low rainfall during the rainy season. This causes low food production and loss of livestock. The agriculture sector plays a vital role in social and economic development in rural areas as rural communities derive their livelihood from agricultural production.

Namibia's food system is instrumental in food production, food accessibility and utilization for livelihood and sustainability. The adverse effects of drought and floods affects the adaptation strategies of subsistence farmers the Namibian government has therefore made commitments to achieving food security through its several policies that support and aims to improve its food systems such as the Harambee Prosperity Plan which aims to end poverty and hunger (UN Food Systems Summit, 2021). Additionally, the government invests in food safety programmes such as the food bank schemes, drought relief programmes and irrigations projects (i.e., Hardap Irrigation Project). Despite these efforts, food security remains a crisis. People living in rural areas have become vulnerable to the current global inflation in food prices and the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic which has left many rural communities food deprived. Moreover, poverty, unemployment, and inequality are among the leading causes of food insecurity in

Namibia. According to the World Bank (2021), a shocking 64% of Namibians live in poverty with an unemployment rate of 20.8%.

2.3 Access to basic services

Water: Although it is the government's responsibility to provide clean water to its residents, many Namibians who live in rural areas and low-income groups still face great difficulties accessing clean water for their daily needs. Few Namibians, particularly in rural areas, have running water or toilets in their homes or compounds (Tjirera, 2018). According to a survey done by Afrobarometer in 2018 only around half of rural Namibians (49%) have their main source of water outside their compounds; only one in every five (20%) have running water in their homes. Dishena (2022) states that many people face this difficulty in the Kavango East and West regions, where the Kavango River is a significant water supply, but residents must avoid crocodiles to access it. In numerous cases, some people have suffered injuries, while others have lost their lives. In addition, because of consuming water with a high salt content from home-made wells, some communities, like that of Amarika village in the Omusati region, located 73 kilometres from Oshakati, continue to worry for their health, while those in Ohangwena must go long distances by foot to fetch water (Dishena, 2022).

Health facilities: According to Rooy, Mufune and Amadhila (2015) during the apartheid era, the Namibian health system was divided along racial lines. Access to health care differed not only between rural and urban residents, but also between rich and poor, and these differences reflected the presence or absence of White people. Since independence, Namibia improved non-White groups' access to health-care services. The country has improved its primary health care system to better meet the demands of the general people (Rooy et al., 2015). According to Christians (2019) in rural areas, there are approximately 5780 individuals per PHC clinic and 58 825 people per district hospital. Hospitals, on the other hand, suffer from overcrowding and long wait times as many individuals forgo clinics and health centres closer to home in favour of hospitals that provide a higher level of service.

Schools: Most children in rural areas in Namibia have access to education however the schools are faced with infrastructural challenges. For example, earlier this year, the northern part of Namibia experienced a heavy flood and some classrooms were destroyed as a result, which led to learners being taught under trees. However, this practice did not only begin after the flood, it has been happening for a long time due to financial constraints in the ministerial budget. According to Shikalepo (2020) schools in remote areas encounter a variety of problems that have the potential to undermine effective teaching and learning. Although, the Covid-19 pandemic worsened some of these challenges, there has been notably digital gaps regarding e-learning in rural schools and isolated areas across the nation during the Covid-19 outbreak. As

was generally predicted, there is a significant digital divide between rural schools and their suburban and urban counterparts. According to the Communications Regulatory Authority of Namibia (CRAN), 78% of the nation's schools or around 1400 out of 1 800 do not have an information and communication technology infrastructure (Staff Reporter, 2022).

Sanitation: According to Clayton and Smith (2023) sanitation has stalled in recent years, according to the government, with multiple ministries tasked with improving sanitation failing to prioritize the issue. Clayton and Smith (2023) further argue that, for example, the Ministry of Urban and Rural Development (MURD) has missed its toilet target four out of the last five years. In 2021, the ministry promised to build 10,000 new rural toilets, but only built 980 before saying that the original target was "erroneously indicated" and 1000 was true. The ministry explained the inability to fulfil even this aim as "late submission of activity plans and accountability reports from the regions resulted in late approval of budgets." Namibia has only 35% of its inhabitants connected to sewerage (Clayton & Smith, 2023). In a survey conducted in 2018, one in three rural Namibians (32%) say they have no access to toilets at all, while almost half (47%) use toilets outside their compounds (Tjirera, 2018). The government's 2008 Water Supply and Sanitation Policy said that "community involvement and participation" would be required to improve sanitation. However, it appears that it has not followed its advice.

2.4 Land accessibility

According to De Villiers et al. (2019) Namibia has two major land tenure systems: freehold in proclaimed metropolitan areas and so-called commercial farms, and customary tenure on communal property in rural areas. With the increasing competition over land and land concentration through illegal fencing witnessed in the communal areas, lack of legal protection of customary land rights exacerbate vulnerabilities and precariousness in access to land (Mendelsohn, Shixwameni & Nakamhela, 2011). As a result, access to and ownership of land, particularly for marginalized groups such as indigenous peoples and women, remains a concern. For women in particular, some traditional authorities continue to uphold traditions and customs that disadvantage women. Even though these institutions are mandated by the Communal Land Reform Act to be in charge of land allocation, the representation of women in these structures is very low (De Villiers et al., 2019).

2.5 Employment and rural economic development

Although it is sometimes considered that people of community areas solely rely on farming, this is not always the case. According to several household surveys, income is primarily obtained from non-agricultural activities such as pensions, business revenues, wages, and remittances (Mendelsohn et al., 2011). Naturally, there is considerable variety amongst families, and many extremely impoverished households rely heavily on agricultural and

commonage resources. On the other hand, most other citizens live on rural farms but rely on non-rural enterprises and jobs (Mendelsohn et al., 2011).

3. Major challenges faced in rural areas in Namibia

Lack of employment opportunities - Namibia's rural areas often lack employment opportunities, economic development, and strong facilities to meet social needs. Job opportunities with better incentives are found in urban centres, which are the country's economic hubs. The existing limited rural job opportunities are low paying. Educational institutions such as schools are a long distance for learners, requiring them to walk to school in the early hours of dawn while it is still dark to arrive on time. The same rural areas are flood-prone; during these disasters, learners are forced to walk through the floodplains to attend school (Amuele & Haidula, 2023). The schools lack decent teaching facilities such as classrooms and, as a result, are taught under trees with no chairs or tables hampering the learning environment's productivity. This is especially challenging considering the weather conditions such as the extreme heat Namibia experiences, high rainfall patterns and during the winter seasons. This also makes the teachers' learning environment conducive to delivering quality education. According to Moses (2019), due to the proximity of educational institutions, some schools provide accommodation, of which some are makeshift, for learners and teachers. However, the conditions are dilapidated, unhygienic and overpopulated with no regular maintenance of the facilities. All these conditions make it difficult to recruit and retain qualified teachers.

Long distances to health facilities - Rural areas are known to have an ageing population as this is usually the preferred retirement place for many. The elderly is thus in need of constant healthcare and the long distance travelling to seek medical attention is tedious. For critical medical attention, people must travel further distances to a town or the capital city. This is an inconvenience especially in emergency cases that require instant health attention. Even more so, there is limited access to public transportation. Road infrastructure is a subsequent challenge. Some areas are not easily accessible with all cars. It is even more challenging to navigate during the rainy season where you risk getting your vehicle stuck in mud. For this reason, public transport or emergency services such as ambulances cannot always operate in such areas.

Hunger and food insecurity - Rural communities face extreme hunger and food insecurity. The recurring local floods and drought affects food production and livestock for sustainable livelihood. The government's food aid programmes for drought relief and famine do not always reach all the communities either. Furthermore, the redline (Veterinary Cordon Fence) in northern Namibia, which was created to contain the Rinderpest outbreak, hinders local farmers

from accessing bigger markets to sell livestock for income generation (Lichtenberg, 2018). These are the contributing factors to rural poverty.

Out-migration - Furthermore, Namibia is a large importing country hence the market for selling local produce is small. These are push factors that causes out-migration of the active working force that can create employment and attract industries to the rural market. Lack of recreational centres and attractions is turning rural areas into merely a holiday home for the youth. The problem of rural exodus, also known as rural-to-urban migrations or rural-to-urban movements, has been a widespread problem for rural communities in most of the world for the previous 50 years (Chigbu, Klaus & Magel, 2022).

Bad network coverage - Network coverage, access to water and electricity are additional major challenges faced in rural areas (Moses, 2019). Network connection is weak in these areas which communication barrier. In addition, lack of information and communication technology devices in rural areas causes communication barriers. This hinders access to the internet for school, business, or work. This was a prevalent challenge during outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic when work and schools migrated online. People residing in the north were disadvantaged due to insufficient network towers and ICT devices.

No access to water and power - For some households, water is accessed from communal taps or boreholes which are a walking distance while some areas do not have electricity. In the case of the latter, rural communities invest in alternative energy sources such as solar, candles for light and cooking with firewood. Housing structures are made of brick and mortar, mud, sticks, wood, or zinc. Some of these structure materials are prone to the adverse effects of the harsh weather especially during the scorching summer months or thunderstorms.

Inaccessibility to land - Finally, unequal access to land. Despite legislations advocating for equal access to land, such as the Communal Land Reform Act 2002, access to land still supports patrilineal systems of land inheritance and accessibility. This disadvantages women to productively use land for livelihood and makes them vulnerable to tenure insecurity.

Below is a SWOT analysis that diagrammatically presents the state of rural development.

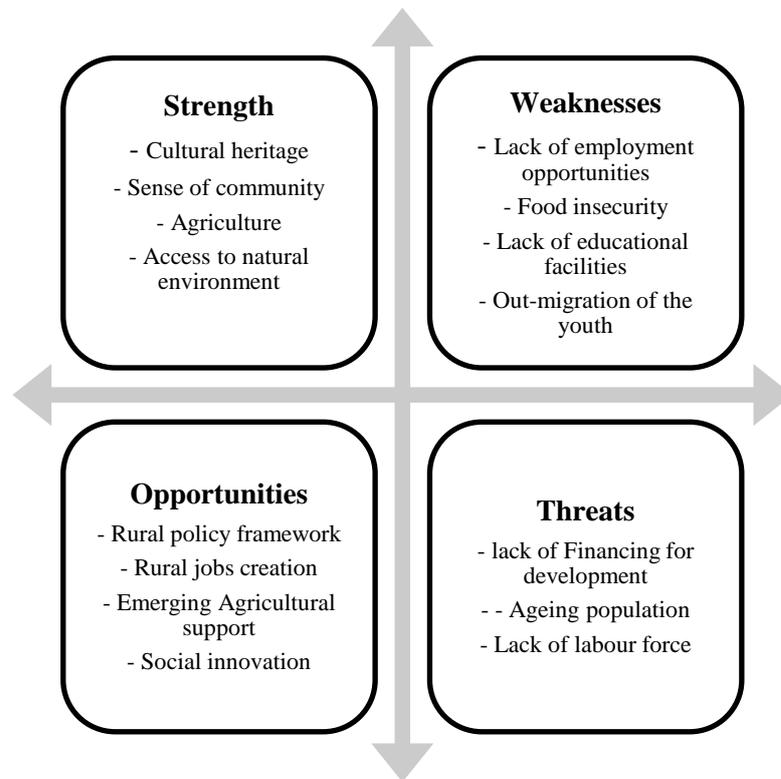


Figure 1: SWOT Analysis of Rural Development in Namibia
Source: Compiled by authors based on literature

4. How rural neglect hinders development of rural areas: A case study of Gibeon, Namibia

According to Keller (n.d) a community's incapacity to sustain and retain community identity and commitment is frequently shown to be significantly impacted by a lack of basic resources to meet the requirements of rural residents. Most planning solutions use a two-pronged set of policies meant to boost resource capacity since resources are recognized to include both fiscal (material) and human resources. This section of the paper presents a case study of a rural area in Namibia that has been neglected in terms of development.

The Gibeon Constituency in the Hardap region has the highest poverty prevalence at 25%, followed by the Rehoboth Rural and Mariental Rural Constituencies (NPC, 2016). After three decades of independence, Namibia still has extreme poverty and inequality (The Namibian, 2019). More than half of the population is uneducated, and social services are in short supply (NSA, 2012). Gibeon is one of the Hardap region's main communal areas. In addition, six recognized traditional authorities have been established, each with the responsibility of

managing and administering communal land on behalf of their respective community. The Gibeon community area has 769 056 acres of land and is home to approximately 12 000 people. According to Hatutale (2020) the main sources of income have been livestock sales, old-age pensions, and, to a lesser extent, remittances sent to elderly parents back home by children working in towns. However, the community has been left in dire poverty ever since Agra has closed its auction pens and relocated all auctions to Mariental, 70 kilometers away, and allowing small stock farmers to sell their livestock (!Gaeb 2020). These individuals will encounter considerable challenges in meeting their basic sustenance, rendering them incapable of providing for their households. Most of their monetary resources have been allocated towards addressing transportation expenses, leaving farmers bereft of funds to procure essential sustenance and demoralizing their prospects for the well-being of their children. This results in socioeconomic consequences.

Infrastructural development at Gibeon has been stagnant with the only noticeable development in the last three decades being the Namibia Development Corporation's Industrial Park. The Park has since become a white elephant due to its location and distance from the residents (!Gaeb, 2020).

5. Conclusion and recommendation

More than a quarter of the population lives in rural areas. However, they are excluded from providing essential services, which are the government's responsibility. The focus of this paper has been to provide an overview of rural development in Namibia, specifically discussing the various challenges faced in rural areas as well as providing evidence of how rural development has been neglected in the country and lastly providing recommendations to enhance rural development in Namibia. The degree of access to services and distance from service providers changes significantly between urban and rural locations regarding access to services (Hatutale, 2020). As a result, the prevalence of insufficient access to services is higher in rural areas than in metropolitan areas. In order to achieve sustainable development in Namibia, there is a need to ensure development in both rural and urban areas without neglecting the other. The underdevelopment in one area directly or indirectly affects the development of the other. When development is prioritized in rural areas, this, too, has the potential to address challenges in urban areas, such as prevalent poverty and unemployment rates.

Based on the challenges and case explained in this paper, the following recommendations are necessary for improving rural development in Namibia:

- Maintain the boundaries of urban areas and focus resources on capacitating villages and settlement areas with land administration infrastructure.

- Improve Information Communication Technology to ensure access to information for rural populations, which is vital to inform decision-making.
- Invest in agricultural training, promoting diversification of farming in different regions to curb the negative impacts of climate change on livelihoods.
- Promote land use planning for households within settlements and villages to cater for proper road infrastructure and install sewer and water reticulation networks.
- Increase the availability of educational facilities.
- Promote land access opportunities for youth and women.
- Participating in the sustainable development of rural areas is essential to achieving socially cohesive development because, in many nations, urban areas receive more development funding (Chigbu, et al., 2022). It can act as the cornerstone for obtaining comparable living circumstances across the board in a nation.

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