



Factsheet # 04

What historical factors have contributed to desertification in Namibia's eastern communal areas?



Challenge

Desertification is a major threat to Namibia's communal semi-arid rangelands, which are home to about 40% of the country's population and where livestock is the main source of income for thousands of households. Grasslands are transformed by desertification into barren landscapes, leading to a loss of biodiversity, ecosystem collapse, and reduced capacity to support livestock and the livelihoods that depend on them.

Currently, desertification processes have been reported in most communal areas of Namibia.

But, what socio-historical factors influence rangeland management in Namibia's communal areas today? How do these factors relate to the current problems of desertification in these areas?

The case of Namibia's eastern communal areas

Namibia's eastern communal areas – the former Herero 'homeland' - are regarded as being heavily overused, and certain regions are exhibiting signs of desertification. But the situation was not always this way.

In pre-colonial times...

Before colonial times, the Ovaherero had an effective rangeland management system that helped prevent overgrazing and desertification. This approach resembled modern rotational grazing schemes.

During the dry season it was common for the livestock of a single homestead to be dispersed among several cattle posts, which were often moved within a large grazing area. In times of prolonged drought, these cattle posts would be moved even further apart to ensure that the animals had access to adequate grazing. Herders also used controlled burning techniques to encourage the regrowth of grasslands before the rainy season.

These strategies helped optimize rangeland use, minimize overgrazing, and prevent the spread of animal diseases. However, the arrival of the colonial state dramatically disrupted this system.

The influence of colonialism

During the German (1884-1915) and subsequent South African (1920-1990) colonial periods, the Ovaherero were subjected to land dispossession, genocide and resettlement in marginal areas such as 'Native Reserves', later consolidated into the larger Herero 'homeland'.

In these areas, cattle mobility was restricted, water sources were scarce, infrastructure development was poor, fire application was prohibited, and herders were forced to seek work outside their villages to pay colonial taxes (e.g. grazing fees).

All these factors severely limited the Ovaherero's ability to avoid sectoral overgrazing and to manage their rangelands sustainably. As a result, signs of desertification became obvious across the homeland territory.

The post-independence situation

After independence, the homeland was declared communal land and several rural development programs, sustainable rangeland management initiatives and community empowerment policies were implemented.

However, the structure of these areas (e.g. in terms of land use and size) has remained largely unchanged from the colonial model. Moreover, population growth, the proliferation of fenced camps to protect livestock against theft, and common pool resource management issues, including the ineffective implementation of grazing plans, also play an important role in hindering the improvement of rangeland conditions.

Despite these circumstances, many Ovaherero communities try to keep desertification at bay, for example, by preventing open access to local rangelands and practicing seasonal grazing using a cattle post where available.

Policy Implications

Restoring the pre-colonial grazing system in the wider region is almost impossible, given the current land distribution and population levels in the country. However, a number of measures could be considered:

Pressure on communal land could be reduced by strengthening the implementation of the ongoing land reform program that has been in place since 1991 (which includes the expansion of communal areas). In particular, people with large numbers of livestock could be encouraged to relocate to resettlement farms.

Improving measures against livestock theft alongside a reduction in the number and size of camps would increase the net communal grazing area.

Implement programs that generate and sustain collective action within communities to avoid continuous grazing and increase resilience to future challenges like climate change.

Reinforce existing community efforts to limit desertification by strengthening tenure rights and improving access to and management of farming infrastructure, such as cattle posts.

Key Findings

- **The current state of desertification in Namibia's eastern communal lands must be understood in a historical context.**
- Past state interventions and their legacies have fundamentally influenced how local rangelands are used and managed today.
- Efforts have been made to improve rangeland management through policy reforms in the post-colonial era.
- Desertification is difficult to manage in communal areas as it requires effective collective action among farmers.
- Nevertheless, Ovaherero communities try to implement desertification mitigation measures despite the current conditions in which they live and farm.

References

Menestrey Schwieger, D. A. & Mbidzo, M. (2020). Socio-historical and structural factors linked to land degradation and desertification in Namibia's former Herero 'homelands'. *Journal of Arid Environments*, 178, 104151.

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The NamTip Project

The collaborative German-Namibian research project "NamTip – A Namibian Perspective on Desertification Tipping Points in the Face of Climate Change" aims to better understand the development of ecological tipping points in dryland rangelands by assessing desertification and woody plant encroachment processes. It also explores management options for preventing such tipping points and restoring degraded rangeland ecosystems.

www.uni-potsdam.de/en/namtip

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