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Translocal livelihoods in southern Africa: A case study from north-central Namibia

Antti Erkkilä*, Nelago Indongo** and Harri Siiskonen***

Abstract

Translocal livelihoods and circular migration characterise the interdependence of rural and urban areas in southern Africa. This study analyses demographic, socio-economic and environmental dimensions of translocal dynamics at the household level in rural north-central Namibia from 1943 to 2012. Special emphasis is placed on the impact of internal migration on the age and sex structure of rural and urban communities, an aspect which has been largely neglected in research to date. Our analysis of the population data shows that the most visible indication of translocality is the distorted age structure of the resident population. Able-bodied persons, particularly males, were virtually absent in many of the homesteads. The empirical evidence from north-central Namibia shows that circular migration has become an essential part of the adaptation strategy of rural households in a changing socio-economic environment. In this context, the improvement of women's land rights indicates change towards a more gender-equal society.

Introduction

Until the late 1990s, rural and urban development were considered in research as almost two independent phenomena, which had different and relatively autonomous dynamics of development. This dualistic idea was reflected in rural-urban migration research. The migration path was seen as a predictable process, where migrants leave the place of their origin (container 1) and settle in the place of their destination (container 2).¹ Relations between migration and livelihoods became an important research topic in the 1990s. Attention was paid to the fundamental role of migration in sustainable rural livelihood strategies.²

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¹ Beate Lohnert and Malte Steinbrink, "Rural and urban livelihoods: A translocal perspective in a South African context", *South African Geographical Journal*, 87 (2), 2005: 95-103 (95); Clemens Greiner and Patrick Sakdapolrak, "Translocality: Concepts, applications and emerging research perspectives", *Geography Compass*, 7 (5), 2013: 373-384.

² Benjamin Etzold, "Mobility, space and livelihood trajectories: New perspectives on migration, translocality and place-making for livelihood studies", in: Leo de Haan, (ed.), *Livelihoods and Development: New Perspectives*, Leiden and Boston, Brill, 2017: 44-68 (51).

The translocal approach allows the container-spatial bias of conventional development research and development cooperation to be overcome. Steinbrink and Niedenführ define translocal livelihoods as “a migration studies approach that originates in development research and attempts to explain migrations and space-spanning social networks in the context of risk and uncertainty.”³ The translocal perspective on livelihood studies recognizes the various kinds of interdependences between rural and urban areas and helps in understanding the role of migration and space-spanning social networks in livelihood security.⁴ According to Etzhold translocality is not a given fact that automatically results from migration. A translocal place has to be produced and reproduced actively through translocal practices or acts, such as human mobility, communication, circulating resources, and acts of investments in translocal networks.⁵

The translocal approach to household dynamics requires reconceptualization of the concept of household. Population censuses, household and other demographic surveys usually define a household consisting of a person or a group of persons, related or unrelated, living together in the same house and having the same catering arrangements – a concept which represents a container-spatial approach. Instead, translocal households have diversified livelihoods through permanent or temporary migration of one or more household members, and these households share responsibilities and transfer resources among household members living at different places.⁶ According to Steinbrink and Niedenführ a translocal community is: “A community whose members live in different places and are linked to one another by functional dependencies that tend to be stronger than those that connect them to other people in the wider social environment. The community is thus to be understood as a social network and not as a place”.⁷ Translocal networks and translocal flows of people, resources, knowledge, and identities indicate the interconnectedness between rural and urban.

In southern Africa rural-urban migration has long historical roots through the migrant labour system established in the early twentieth century. Translocality became the dominant mode of socio-economic organisation of rural households and communities due to

³ Malte Steinbrink and Hannah Niedenführ, *Africa on the Move: Migration, Translocal Livelihoods and Rural Development in sub-Saharan Africa*, Cham, Springer, 2020: 19.

⁴ Ibid.: 35.

⁵ Etzold, “Mobility”: 53.

⁶ See Namibia Statistics Agency (NSA), *Namibia 2011 Population and Housing Census: Main Report*, NSA, Windhoek, 2013: 81, <https://d3rp5jatom3eyn.cloudfront.net/cms/assets/documents/p19dmn58quram30ttun89rdrp1.pdf>; NSA, *Namibia Demographic and Health Survey 2013*, Windhoek, NSA, 2014: 11, <https://dhsprogram.com/pubs/pdf/fr298/fr298.pdf>; NSA, *Namibia Household Income and Expenditure Survey (NHIES) 2015/2016 Report*, Windhoek, NSA, 2018: 18, https://d3rp5jatom3eyn.cloudfront.net/cms/assets/documents/NHIES_2015-16.pdf; United Nations (UN), *Principles and Recommendations for Population and Housing Censuses: Revision 3*, Department of Economic and Social Affairs Statistics Division, New York, United Nations, 2017: 38, https://unstats.un.org/unsd/publication/seriesM/Series_M67rev3en.pdf

⁷ Steinbrink and Niedenführ, *Africa*: 40.

restrictions on movement imposed by the South African apartheid regime. Only migrant labourers were allowed to leave their home region for work, i.e. in mining, industry, agriculture, and the service sector. The South African model of the migrant labour system was launched in the present Namibian territory following the beginning of South African rule there in 1915. Since independence in 1990, migration in Namibia has primarily involved human mobility across the administrative boundaries within the country (internal migration) and not so much across international borders (international migration).

The objective of this study is to examine the translocal livelihoods system in rural north-central Namibia. Special emphasis is placed on the impact of internal migration on age and sex structure of rural communities, an aspect, which was largely neglected in earlier research. Compared to previous translocality studies related to southern Africa, the present research is based on wider and more versatile demographic and environmental data to supplement the household survey.

Data and methodology

Case study area

The household data were obtained in 2012 from the case study area located within the Egambo and Otaukondjele villages in Ohangwena Region (see Figure 1). The centre point of the case study area is located 10 km south-west of the nearest town, Eenhana, and 20 km south of the Angola–Namibia border. The case study area lies within the sparsely populated but fairly densely wooded Eastern Sand Drainage Zone of the Cuvelai Basin and is visible in aerial photographs from 2011 as a discrete cluster of 50 small-scale farms covering an area of 5 km x 4 km.

In 2012, the case study area was not yet connected to the power distribution network. There were no proper roads, only heavily rutted tracks in deep sand. In the centre of the case study area was a school offering 10 grades and a pre-primary class. Only the school and a few homesteads nearby were connected to the communal water supply system. Most of households were using safe potable water, though there were also a few households that relied on hand-dug wells. Under Regulation 3 of the Communal Land Reform Act 5 of 2002, the maximum size of the land that may be allocated under customary land rights was first set at 20 hectares per household and raised later to 50 hectares.⁸ A typical farm in the case study area had around 10 ha of fenced land that included 2 ha of crop fields. Even today the case study area is still relatively remote and not easily accessible and there is no proper road connection to the nearest main road or to Eenhana town.

Egambo Combined School, which is located in the centre of the case study area, had 289 learners during the 2013 school calendar year. There were slightly more male than female learners. The school staff included 12 teachers, one cleaner and one secretary.

⁸ Republic of Namibia, "Annotated Statutes: Regulations Made in Terms of Communal Land Reform Act 5 of 2002, Section 45, General Regulations", *Government Notice*, 159 of 2016 (GG 6069).

Household survey

A semi-structured household questionnaire was carried out in August 2012 in the case study area and 38 homesteads were visited. In addition, follow-up visits were conducted in 2014, 2015 and 2019. The objectives of the household survey were discussed at the beginning of 2012 with the incumbent councillors of Ondobe and Eenhana constituencies at the University of Namibia (UNAM) main campus in Windhoek. The councillors then contacted the headmen in the case study area and spoke on the radio to the community in order to explain the objectives of the research and to request their participation. The interview team consisted of three senior scholars and two research assistants. Two of the interviews were conducted in English, and the rest in the Oshiwambo language. Most of the respondents were Protestants, mostly Lutheran or Anglican. Typically the respondent was the head of a household, but in some cases they were other relatives, and in two cases a domestic worker was the respondent. In total there were 24 female and 14 male respondents. The median age was 50 years for female and 54 years for male respondents. The interviews were recorded with the permission of the interviewees. The duration of the recorded interviews was 90 minutes on average and interviews took place at the homesteads. The interviews focused on the following topics: household demography, farming, livestock, household economy, human migration and on-farm trees.

Supplementary data

The primary data obtained via the household survey of 2012 were supplemented by the Namibia 2011 Population and Housing Census (NPHC) data, which allowed the analysis to be extended to the regional and national level. Preliminary data on Registration of Customary Land Rights (CLRR), recorded in a digital communal land registry called the Namibia Communal Land Administration System (NCLAS), were used to obtain information on the sex and age of landholders in north-central Namibia. Aerial photographs from 1943, 1970, 1996 and 2011 were used to analyse demographic and environmental changes in the case study area. The rectified and geo-referenced aerial photographs were studied visually on a computer screen using geographic information systems (GIS).

Results

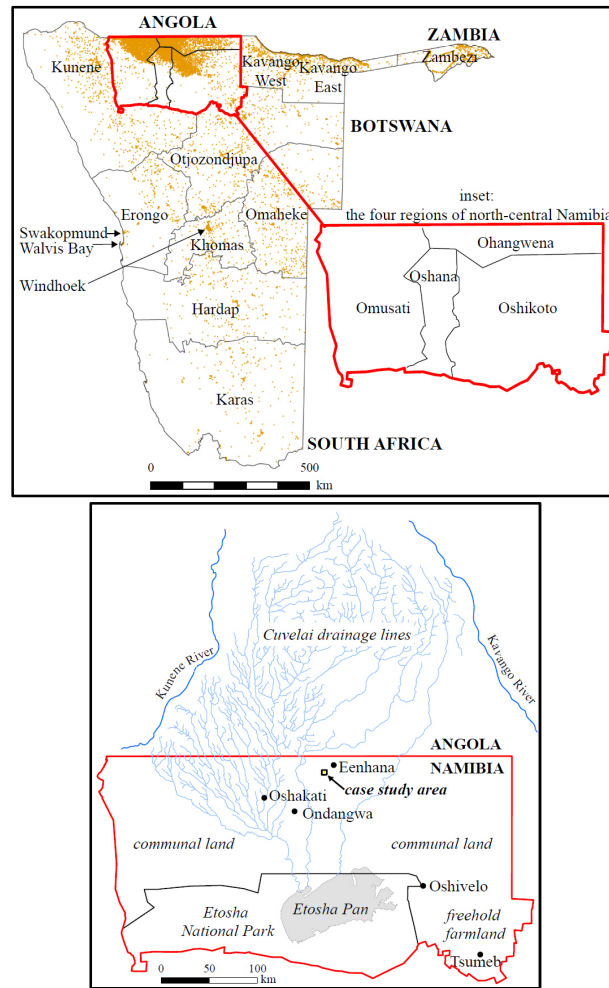
Geographic and demographic features of north-central Namibia

North-central Namibia is located in the southern part of the Cuvelai Basin, which is characterised by shallow ephemeral floodwater courses (Figure 1). Since independence in 1990 the area has been administratively divided into four regions: Ohangwena, Omusati, Oshana and Oshikoto.

North-central Namibia, together with Kavango West, Kavango East and Zambezi regions, are the most densely populated rural areas in the country due to the relatively favourable ecological conditions. In these northern parts of Namibia higher rainfall, floodwater from Angola and international border rivers have enabled the practice of mixed farming,

whereas in Central and South Namibia large and small stock farming are the main sources of livelihood and the population density has remained much lower.⁹

Figure 1. Population distribution in Namibia.



The distribution of dots represents population distribution in Namibia, adapted from NSA, *Namibia 2011 Census Atlas*: 25. Inset to the right: Cuvelai drainage system.

⁹ John Mendelsohn and Stephanie Mendelsohn, *Sudoeste de Angola: Um retrato de terra e da vida*, *South West Angola: A Portrait of Land and Life*, Porto, Arte e Ciência, 2018; Paulo Calunga, Tuwilika Haludilu, John Mendelsohn, Nasso Soares and Beat Weber, *Vulnerability in the Cuvelai Basin: Angola*, Occasional Paper 12, Luanda, Development Workshop, 2015; John Mendelsohn, Selma de Obeid and Carole Roberts, *A Profile of North-Central Namibia*, Windhoek, Gamsberg Macmillan, 2000; Antti Erkkilä, *Living on the Land: Change in Forest Cover in North-Central Namibia 1943-1996*, *Silva Carelica* 37, Joensuu, University of Joensuu, 2001; Antti Erkkilä and Harri Siiskonen, *Forestry in Namibia 1850-1990*, Joensuu, University of Joensuu, 1992.

Labour migration has been characteristic of the economy in north-central Namibia since the early twentieth century and began the tradition of circular migration in the country. Before the 1950s, migrant work was a temporary phase in the life of young able-bodied men before marriage and obtaining land for cultivation and housing. Labour migration has since become a permanent necessity and a viable strategy for rural households. Since independence, the need for cash has grown due to better availability of consumer goods and change in consumption patterns.¹⁰

During the South African apartheid regime, temporary residence outside “homelands” was allowed only for individual migrant workers, not for their families. Namibia’s independence abolished the rest of the previous restrictions on population movement and allowed all persons the right to reside and settle in any part of the country.

North-central Namibia constitutes a large area with considerable environmental and socio-economic diversity. For example, the Oshakati–Ongwediva–Ondangwa urban corridor in Oshana Region is the second largest urban and commercial complex in Namibia after Windhoek. Other areas that have rapidly urbanised include Oshikango, which is a border post with Angola and has been part of the town of Helao Nafidi since 2004, and Omuthiya, the regional capital of Oshikoto since 2011. Thus, north-central Namibian households do not form a homogenous group. In villages located close to the main tarred roads, and in the vicinity of the urbanised area in particular, sources of livelihood are more variable than in remote rural villages. A large number of households are located far away from urban centres and do not have a direct everyday connection to urban markets.

Rural women's land rights

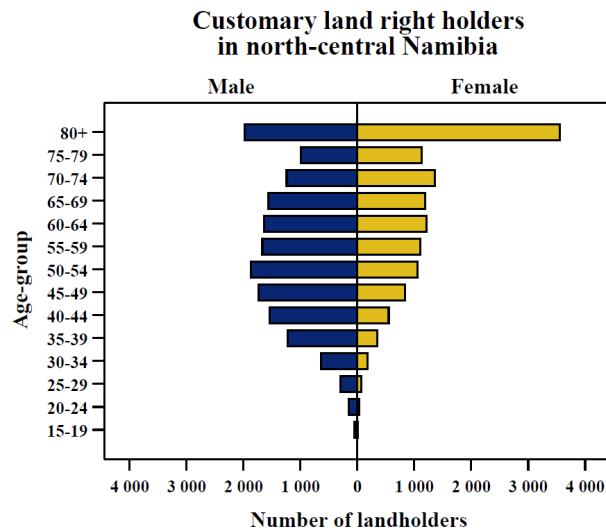
According to the Namibia 2011 Population and Housing Census (NPHC) data, 54% of households were female-headed and 46% male-headed in rural north-central Namibia. Our analysis of preliminary communal land registration data disclosed that in north-central Namibia, females represented 43% and males represented 57% of holders of customary land rights. The male holders of a customary land right were in the majority in all age-groups, except those aged 70 years or more (Figure 2).

The analysis of preliminary communal land registration data shows that in north-central Namibia young people (age groups under 30) may also enjoy customary land rights. It seems that sons or other male relatives are still favoured today in matters of inheritance and land rights acquisition. Our analysis of preliminary communal land registration data also shows that, in the older age groups, the share of female holders of a customary land right is gradually increasing, and is very high in the 80+ age group. The increase of female land right holders in the older age groups demonstrates successful government policy that stipulates that land rights should be transferred to the surviving spouse. Before

¹⁰ Inge Tvedten and Selma Nangulah, *Social Relations of Poverty: A Case-Study from Owambo*, Namibia. Research report 1999, 5, Bergen, Chr. Michelsen Institute, 1999: 32, <http://hdl.handle.net/11250/2435834>

independence, according to the matrilineal customary system, widows and their children were often evicted from the land by the husband's relatives.¹¹

Figure 2. Customary land right holders by sex in north-central Namibia.



Source: Data set, NCLAS (Namibia Communal Land Administration System), Preliminary data on Registration of Customary Land Rights (CLRR), January 2014, Windhoek.

The relatives of the husband may still reclaim right to obtain the movable assets, such as cattle and farm equipment. Dispossession of property worsens the situation of widows, who usually take care of a number of grandchildren and fostered children, including orphans.

The Namibia 2011 Population and Housing Census “enumerated people at the place where they spent the Census Reference Night” while the head of household was defined as “the person of either sex who is looked upon by the other members of the household as their leader or main decision-maker”. The absent husband was not represented in the profile of household composition.¹²

¹¹ See Manfred O. Hinz and Ndatelela E. Namwoonde, (eds.), *Customary Law Ascertained: Volume 1: The Customary Law of the Ovambo, Kavango and Caprivi Communities of Namibia*, Windhoek, Namibia Scientific Society, 2010: 94f.; Harri Siiskonen, “Land use rights and gender in Ovamboland, north-central Namibia, since the 1930s”, *Fennia*, 187 (1), 2009: 5-15, <https://fennia.journal.fi/article/view/3700>

¹² NSA, *Namibia 2011 Census Migration Report*, Windhoek, NSA, 2015: 2, <https://d3rp5jat0m3eyn.cloudfront.net/cms/assets/documents/p19dmqq344hnc6j1cioc1a1eg21.pdf> ; NSA, *Namibia 2011 Population*: 81.

The results of the present research highlight the importance of understanding that designations like 'head of household' and 'holder of a customary land right' do not always refer to the same person in rural communities. A woman may be the head of household, while her son is the holder of a customary land right. Thus, depending on the underlying definition of the data collection system, the concept 'head of household' may have several interpretations. For example, if a husband is a migrant labourer in central or southern Namibia, he may still consider himself the head of household and his wife as the farm manager.

Case study area in north-central Namibia

History of human settlement

The origin of the farming community in the case study area is related to the increased population pressure in the Cuvelai Basin that became a burning issue in the 1930s. In addition to natural population growth, the demarcation of the international boundary between colonial South West Africa (Namibia) and Portuguese Angola in 1927/28 increased the population pressure on the southern side of the border. In 1928 the disputed borderland area was incorporated into Angola, which caused a large number of refugees to move to Namibia.¹³ Many of them searched for a new place to settle in the Eastern Sand Drainage Zone of the Cuvelai Basin, a remote area which was inhabited by small groups of hunter-gatherers.

The first settlers in the case study area established their farms in places where potable water was available for humans and cattle, and soils were suitable for rainfed crop cultivation. In the beginning, the new settlement consisted of three farms. Soon the area became known to many people who were passing by to their cattle posts further away. Nephews and nieces of Nghishuna Xuiila, the founding headman, grew up and got married, and gradually more and more people came to live on his homestead. Relatives and non-relatives asked permission to establish their farms in the nearby area.¹⁴

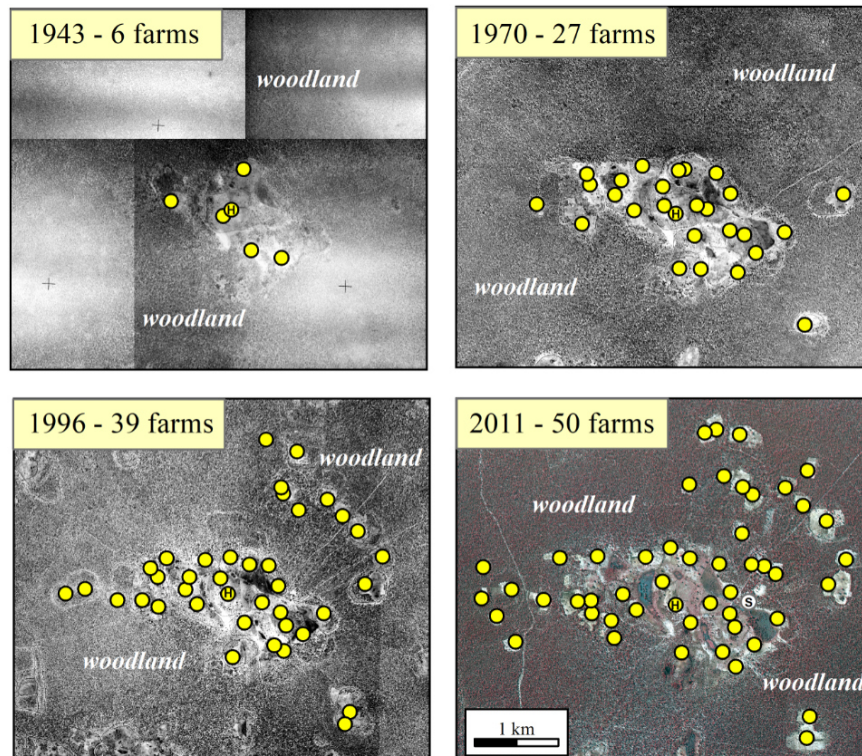
Based on interviews and interpretation of aerial photographs, woodland for the first three farms in the case study area was most likely cleared in the 1930s. The founder and the

¹³ Emmanuel Kreike, *Re-creating Eden: Land Use, Environment, and Society in Southern Angola and Northern Namibia*, Portsmouth, Heinemann, 2004: 72-73; Gregor Dobler, "Boundary drawing and the notion of territoriality in pre-colonial and early colonial Ovamboland", *Journal of Namibian Studies*, 3, 2008: 7-30, <https://namibian-studies.com/index.php/JNS/article/view/119>

¹⁴ Interviews with Petrus Nghoshi, Egambo village, 18 January 2014; 12 December 2015, 7 December 2019; Lucia Hamunime Ndeuyepa, Egambo village, 17 January 2014, 12 December 2015; Eliaser Nghitewa, Egambo village, 12 December 2015; Joseph Shipahu, Ekamba A village, 13 December 2015; Fillemon Kauluma, Ongula village, 7 December 2019. In 1962, Nghishuna Xuiila passed away. The second headman of Egambo village was Nandjebo Kamati. He was brought up at the homestead of his maternal uncle, Nghishuna, and married and established his own homestead and farm close by. In 1963, he returned to the farm of his late uncle and took over the headman's post. In 1986 Nandjebo passed away, and two years later his maternal nephew, Nghaamwawali Petrus Nghoshi (born 1940), started as the third headman. The fourth headman, Eliaser Nghitewa, was appointed 2 January 2021.

very first headman moved from a village some 20 km southwest.¹⁵ In 1943 there was a cluster of six farms surrounded by dense woodland. In 1970 there were 27 farms, in 1996 the number had increased to 39, and in 2012 according to ground-truthing there were 50 farms (Figure 3). In the 2012 household survey, a household consisted of seven resident members on average.

Figure 3. Homestead locations (coloured spots) in the case study area in north-central Namibia.



H = headman, S = Egambo Combined School. Visual interpretation of rectified and geo-referenced aerial photographs from 1943, 1970, 1996 and 2011. Coordinates of centroid: S 17° 32' E 16° 15'.

In the interview of 18 January 2014, Nghaamwawali Petrus Nghoshi, the headman of Egambo village, was asked whether his family had relatives in farms in the case study area. The headman indicated that 26 households have, or have recently had, a head of

¹⁵ Interview with Petrus Nghoshi, Egambo village, 18 January 2014. Nghishuna Xuilla, the maternal clan of *Aakwanangadu* (crocodiles), came from Onakalunga village of Ondonga, about 15 km north-east of the mission house in Oshigambo. When moving from Onakalunga to Egambo, Nghishuna and his group trekked about 20 km north-east. He was accompanied by his brother and his nephews (sister's children, *ovatekulu*), and a third man who was not related to the others. While they were walking, Nghishuna carried his maternal nephew, Nandjebo, on his shoulders.

household/spouse who was a relative mostly of his lineage. Interpretation of aerial photographs and household interviews suggests that a large number of these particular farms had been in cultivation for more than 50 years. Most of the non-relatives of the headman's family were newcomers who had cleared their fields from the surrounding densely wooded area. Non-relatives included teachers working at Egambo Combined School. Household interviews revealed that many newcomers were related to each other. Most of the land right holders, who occupied new farm sites (cleared by themselves), had moved from west to east, from the communities residing not more than 50 km away.

Agroforestry landscape

The core of the case study area has an open agroforestry landscape of crop fields and homesteads, scattered fruit trees such as bird-plum (*Berchemia discolor* Hemsl.) and marula (*Sclerocarya birrea* Hochst.), some patches of grassland, and a few treeless clay pans. Open agroforestry landscape is surrounded by dense woodland, where homesteads and crop fields are more isolated and occupants do not have visual contact with each other. The woodland is dominated by tree species such as burkea (*Burkea africana* Hook.), African teak (*Pterocarpus angolensis* DC.) and silver cluster-leaf (*Terminalia sericea* Burch. ex DC). The cattle may graze on individual fenced farmland and on unfenced village land, the commonage. Pearl millet and sorghum are the common crops grown in the fields. A homestead is placed within a cultivated field area.

The local farming tradition is characterised by frequent relocation of homestead and livestock pens within the same field area.¹⁶ A major reason for the relocation is the fact that the old homestead site becomes gradually fertile and thus becomes the best spot in the field for agricultural production. This farming practice should not be confused with shifting cultivation, where the whole field area in cultivation is rotated. In the case study area, between June 2011 and August 2012, 15 of 38 homesteads had been relocated or were in the middle of a transfer process. The practice of relocation is declining due to shortage of labour and more generally due to the use of permanent materials in the construction of buildings and other structures.¹⁷

The visual interpretation of aerial photographs reveals that small-scale agriculture has not been a significant driver of deforestation in the case study area since 1943. Deforestation has been modest and limited to clearing of land for cultivation and housing. Our findings from the case study area suggest that the migration decisions are not primarily accelerated by environmental change.¹⁸

¹⁶ See Erkkilä, *Living*: 92-95.

¹⁷ Antti Erkkilä and Nelago Indongo, "Relocation of the homestead: A customary practice in the communal areas of north-central Namibia", in: Tor Halvorsen, Hilde Ibsen, Henri-Count Evans and Sharon Penderis, (eds.), *Knowledge for Justice: Critical Perspectives from Southern African-Nordic Research Partnerships*, Cape Town, African Minds, 2017: 227-238, <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.1086409>

¹⁸ See Dina Ionesco, Daria Mokhnacheva and Francois Gemene, *The Atlas of Environmental Migration*, London and New York, Routledge, 2017.

Farming

Access to arable land controlled by local traditional leaders has been the corner stone of rural life in north-central Namibia. Usufruct rights to land are nowadays mostly registered, inherited and transferred to the surviving spouse or another relative. This reform has brought predictability and stability to land tenure on communal lands.¹⁹

Labour is by far the most important input required for crop production.²⁰ Even though dryland crop yields are very low, the home-grown produce is highly valued by resident and non-resident household members. In addition, according to the Communal Land Reform Act 5 of 2002, a Chief or Traditional Authority may cancel a customary land right “(a) if the land is being used for a purpose other than the purpose for which it has been allocated; (b) if the land has been kept dormant for three consecutive years”.²¹

In the case study area, most of the male-headed but less than half of the female-headed households reported that they were able to produce enough grain to satisfy their own consumption. Some of the interviewed households reported that they were occasionally able to sell their farm products, such as grain and beans. One fifth of the households had another field area for grain production elsewhere in north-central Namibia while one third of the households had a distant cattle post, and four of these were in Angola. Tilling of soil was done by hand hoes and ploughs drawn by oxen. Only one household had used a tractor to till the soil. Field observations and interviews confirmed that the ploughed area was often larger than the actual area sown with crops. During the planting season many of the households were assisted by their neighbours and their non-resident household members.

In the case study area almost 80% (30/38) of the interviewed households, had livestock, even though most of them owned only a few goats or one head of cattle. The main argument for why households had not acquired livestock or owned only a few head of cattle was scarcity of pasture and expansion of the fencing off of communal land. Nearly all respondents from the household survey conducted in the case study area in 2012 claimed that fencing off of communal land had increased extensively and had reduced the commons available for pasture. Poor households had to restrict grazing to their own farmland or to commons located in the vicinity of the settled area. Cattle were rarely sold.

Population dynamics

Among the 38 households visited in the case study area, 263 persons were reported as resident household members (Figure 4). Females represented 52% and males 48%. Children (0–14 years of age) represented 49%, people of working-age (15–59 years of age) 43%, and elderly people (60 years or more) 8%. In the 20–59 age group the

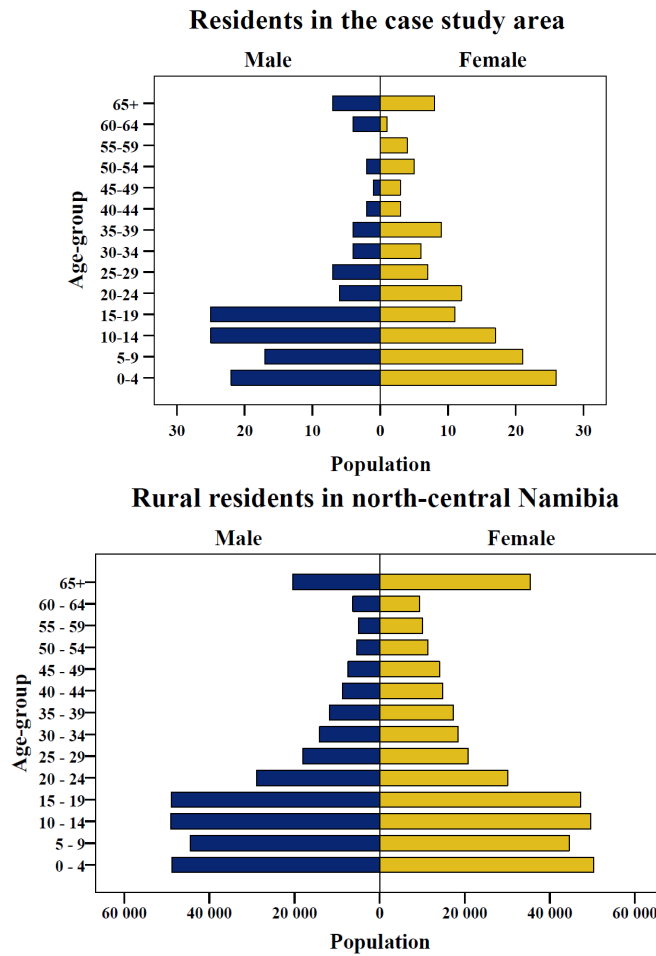
¹⁹ Wolfgang Werner, “Land Tenure and Governance on Communal Land in Namibia”, Paper Presented at the Second National Land Conference, Windhoek, 1–5 October 2018, 2018, http://dna.nust.na/landconference/submissions_2018/Land_tenure_and_governance.pdf

²⁰ Mendelsohn et al., *Profile*: 53.

²¹ Republic of Namibia, “Annotated Statutes”.

number of females was nearly double compared to that of males. Grandchildren (0–14 years of age) represented 32% of the resident household population.

Figure 4. Population pyramids for usual residents in the case study area and in rural north-central Namibia.



Sources: Data set, Household survey, Semi-structured household questionnaire data, 38 households, Egambo and Otakondjele villages, Ohangwena Region, Namibia, August, 2012; Data set, NPHC (Namibia Population and Housing Census 2011), PUMS Data Set: Persons Records. Anonymous data were acquired from the Namibia Statistics Agency (NSA), January 2014, Windhoek.

The main reported sources of cash income for households were pension and social grants (17/38; 45%), migrant labour (6/38; 16%), farm products (6/38; 16%), wage/casual

work, business (6/38; 16%) and relatives/neighbours (3/38; 7%). In Namibia all citizens are eligible at the age of 60 years for an old age pension.²² In north-central Namibia old age pensions and other direct social allowances form an essential source of cash income, especially for rural households. Furthermore, households also obtain cash income from pensions due to disability, and subsidies for orphaned children.

The age structure of the population in the case study area resembles the population composition in rural north-central Namibia (Figure 4). The most noticeable feature is the low number of economically active people (20–59 years of age) in the population in the case study area, particularly males. Our analysis of the labour force in households indicated a significant shortage of labour to perform household duties, farming and other agricultural work. The share of resident household members who were 15–59 years of age – but not full-time learners/students, nor ill, disabled or in early retirement – was 26% (68/263). Most of the visited households (23/38; 61%) had none or only one resident household member in the 15–59 year category of economically active people. A characteristic of households in the case study area was that children were often entrusted to other household members, usually grandmothers. According to the Namibia Demographic and Health Survey 2013, in the four regions of north-central Namibia 26–28% of children under the age of 18 were not living with either parent although both parents were alive.²³

The population pyramid for rural north-central Namibia illustrates a large young population and a relatively high number of elderly people (Figure 4). The share of females is much higher than that of males in the age groups of 25 years or more. In the Namibia 2011 Population and Housing Census (NPHC) data, the sex ratio for usual residents in north-central Namibia was 85, which means that there were 85 men for every 100 women on average. The average sex ratio was the same in both urban and rural areas.

In the case study area a total of 86 persons were reported to be non-resident household members who had moved permanently or temporarily to other locations. These people included persons working or looking for work elsewhere, children resident elsewhere, children in boarding schools, and students and trainees. Thus, 25% of the household members were non-resident. Females of working age had usually moved to other locations in north-central Namibia, whereas males moved more often to the urban areas of Erongo and Khomas regions (Figure 5).

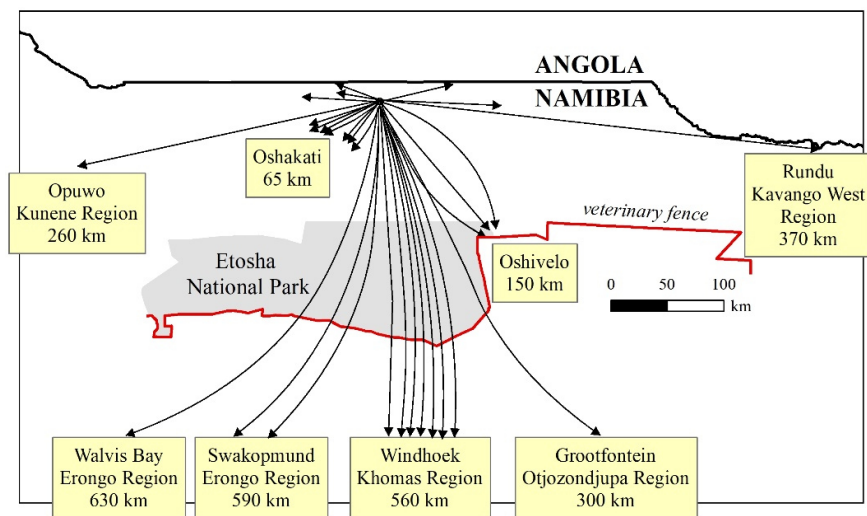
In the case study area, 74% (28/38) of the heads of household were resident and 26% (10/38) non-resident. Most of the resident heads of household were old age pensioners (60 years of age or more) or pensioners due to disability (18/28; 64%); there were only four wage/business earners. Eight of the non-resident heads of household, due to work or training, were living in towns in Central and South Namibia (Lüderitz, Okahandja,

²² Stephen Devereux, *Social Pensions in Namibia and South Africa*, IDS Discussion Paper 379, Brighton, Institute for Development Studies, 2001, <https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/handle/20.500.12413/13852>

²³ NSA, *Namibia Demographic and Health Survey 2013*: 22.

Tsumeb, Walvis Bay, Windhoek), one was working in South Africa and one was farming in Oshana Region. The majority of resident heads of household were females (15/28; 54%), whereas most non-resident heads of household were males (8/10; 80%). When the number of resident and non-resident heads of household were combined, female heads of household represented 45% (17/38) and males 55% (21/38).

Figure 5. Long-term migration from the case study area in north-central Namibia.



Adapted from Antti Erkkilä, "Väestön- ja ympäristönmuutos Pohjois-Namibiassa", in Kari Miettinen and Jan Kuhanen, (eds.), *Ystävällistä viisautta: Professori Harri Siiskosen 60-vuotisjuhlakirja*, Kuopio, University Press of Eastern Finland, 2016: 47-70 (54).

In the case study area the resident school-age population seems to receive primary education and most of them attend several grades of secondary school but generally no further education, a lack which is closely linked with youth unemployment. Translocal social networking seems to open a pathway to better positions in working life and better income for the members of wealthier households only.

In north-central Namibia male migration from rural villages mainly represents moving to find work and covers the whole active working life. Female labour migration from rural villages is quite a new phenomenon, even though increasing numbers of women started to seek jobs elsewhere as early as in the 1980s. Women have moved more often within the four regions of north-central Namibia, whereas men usually travel further away to

central and southern parts of the country.²⁴ Namibia seems to be following the development of South Africa, where the number of female migrants has increased rapidly since the first decade of the 21st century and has become an essential part of the translocal livelihood for the poorest rural households.²⁵

Circular migration between regions

In Namibia the economically active population seems to prefer to reside in urban rather than in rural areas, though people often return to their rural residence at the age of 60 years or more. The visits of males working in the urban centres to their rural homes are often limited to vacations, harvesting or special events, whereas the women working in urban centres in northern Namibia visit their rural households more often.²⁶

Namibia consists of 14 regions, of which the most urbanised are Erongo and Khomas regions. In the Namibia 2011 Population and Housing Census (NPHC) the level of urbanization was 87% and 95% in Erongo and Khomas, respectively. These two regions (Erongo–Khomas), located in the central part of the country, represented 51% of the urban population in Namibia. The highest rates of in-migration were in Erongo–Khomas, where more than 40% of residents were born elsewhere. In contrast, the regions of Ohangwena and Omusati in north-central Namibia are characterised by high out-migration, and more than 20% of people born in these regions usually live elsewhere. In the Namibia 2011 Population and Housing Census the place of usual residence was defined as “[t]he town or village where a person usually lived, i.e. where a person had lived for the past 6 months, or intended to live for the next 6 months”.²⁷

The population pyramid for urban areas in Erongo–Khomas (Figure 6) is bulky in the middle and has a relatively narrow apex indicating that there is a large proportion of working-age people (15–59 years of age). The shape of the pyramid is fairly similar to the pyramid representing the urban population in the four regions of north-central Namibia. However, there is a difference in the distribution by sex. In the urban areas of Erongo–Khomas, in the 20–64 age group, the share of males is slightly higher than females. In all age groups in urban north-central Namibia, the number of females is much higher than the number of males.

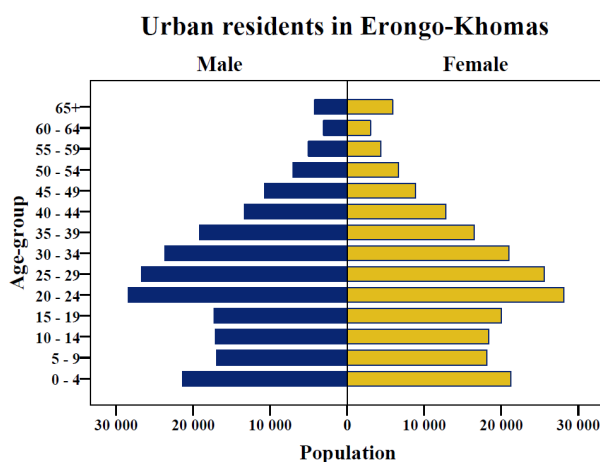
²⁴ Mendelsohn et al.: *Profile*: 41; Ndeyapo Nickanor, Lawrence Kazembe and Jonathan Crush, *Food Security in Africa's Secondary Cities, No 2: The Oshakati–Ongwediva–Ondangwa Corridor*, Namibia, Urban Food Security Series 28, Cape Town, African Food Security Network AFSUN, 2019.

²⁵ Carol S. Camlin, Rachel C. Snow and Victoria Hosegood, “Gendered patterns of migration in rural South Africa”, *Population, Space and Place*, 20, 2014: 528-551 (531), <https://doi.org/10.1002/psp.1794>

²⁶ Bruce Frayne, “Migration and urban survival strategies in Windhoek, Namibia”, *Geoforum*, 35 (4), 2004: 489-505 (500).

²⁷ NSA, *Namibia 2011 Population*: 81.

Figure 6. Population pyramid for the usual residents in urban Erongo–Khomas.



Source: Data set, Namibia Population and Housing Census 2011 (NPHC), PUMS Data Set: Persons Records. Anonymous data were acquired from the Namibia Statistics Agency (NSA), January 2014, Windhoek.

In the Namibia 2011 Population and Housing Census (NPHC) the birthplace refers to the place where the respondent's mother was usually living when she gave birth. Our analysis of NPHC data shows that 27% (130,000 people) of usual residents in Erongo–Khomas were born in north-central Namibia; of which females represented 44% and males represented 56%. The number of in-migrants from north-central Namibia was remarkably high in the 20–49 age group (79%) compared to the age group 19 or below (14%) and the age group 50 or more (7%). In 2011, 25% of people in the age group 20–49 born in north-central Namibia were usual residents in Erongo–Khomas.

Discussion

Migrant remittances are of outstanding importance for the economic development of many African countries.²⁸ The role of economic remittances of migrants to their rural family members has been one of the key areas in migration research. More attention, however, has been given to international remittances compared to remittances from internal migrants. The general conclusion of these studies is that remittances play an immense role as a driver of development and in the survival of poor rural households.²⁹

²⁸ Claudia Natali and Leon Isaacs, "Remittances to and from Africa", in: Aderanti Adepoku, Corrado Fumagalli and Nanjala Nyabola, (eds.), *Africa Migration Report: Challenging the Narrative*, Addis Ababa, International Organization for Migration, 2020: 117-131 (119-120); see also Ionesco et al., *Atlas*: 104; Jeffrey H. Cohen, "Migration, remittances, and household strategies", *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 40, 2011: 103-114.

²⁹ Steinbrink and Niedenführ, *Africa*: 136-139; Jørgen Carling, "Remittances: eight analytical perspectives", in: Tanja Bastia and Ronald Skeldon, (eds.), *Routledge Handbook of Migration and Development*, London and New York, Routledge, 2020: 114-124.

In Greiner's study focusing on the Fransfontein community in the Kunene Region of Namibia, remittances were relatively more important to poor households than to more affluent households that had managed to diversify their income successfully.³⁰ Frayne's analysis on urban survival in Windhoek reveals the importance of food, particularly millet, received from rural areas. Of his urban respondents, 81% rated the food they received from their rural homestead and friends as 'important' or 'very important' and 11% rated this food as 'critical to their survival'.³¹

In the case study area in north-central Namibia, remittances from internal migrants were modest and did not solve the economic problems of rural households. On the other hand, the migration of young and middle-aged adults had resulted in a shortage of labour for carrying out rural household duties and agricultural work. Pensions and social allowances formed the most important sources of cash income. Without these allowances, poor households would be in an economic crisis. Cash income was used for consumption goods, school fees and different kinds of services. For the more educated and wealthier quintile of households, whose household members were working in urban centres, the circular migration provided a means to improve their economic position. They invested the funds earned to support the education of their children, improve buildings and acquire more livestock, particularly cattle.

Tvedten and Nangulah, in their study focusing on social relations of poverty in north-central Namibia, emphasize that ownership of livestock is an important measure of rural poverty.³² Ownership of livestock also identified the wealthiest households in the case study area. The wealthiest quintile of households was active in migrant work and used the cash income for acquiring more livestock, mainly cattle. Our findings illustrate clearly how the environmental impact of translocality in communal lands is restricted to farmlands and nearby commons. Grazing of livestock in far-away cattle posts by wealthy households may lead to land degradation, which is an issue that requires further research.

The non-economic consequences of human mobility are increasingly discussed using the concept of social remittances.³³ Intangible transfers of ideas and practices may have various social and cultural outcomes. In north-central Namibia female migration is increasing and approximately half of the rural households are female-headed. Further research is needed on the effect of social remittances on gender and other socio-cultural aspects. The large number of female-headed households and improvement of women's land rights indicate change towards a more gender-equal society.

³⁰ Clemens Greiner, "Migration, translocal networks and socio-economic stratification in Namibia", *Africa*, 81 (34), 2011: 606-627 (616-618).

³¹ Bruce Frayne, "Rural productivity and urban survival in Namibia: Eating away from home", *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, 23 (1), 2005: 51-76 (60-66).

³² Tvedten and Nangulah, *Social Relations*: 48.

³³ Ilka Vari-Lavoisier, "Social remittances", in: Tanja Bastia and Ronald Skeldon, (eds.), *Routledge Handbook of Migration and Development*, London and New York, Routledge, 2020: 25-135.

The position and status of grandparents and other elderly persons have changed radically in rural north-central Namibia. Previously, children were sent to live with their grandparents to help them in cultivation and household work. Nowadays, grandparents have to take care of young children while their parents are working and living away from home. Rural households have become dependent on old age pensions and other social allowances, which is an indication of poverty in rural households. The distorted age structure in the case study area, and in north-central Namibia in general, highlights the importance of rural-urban social networking for households. The demographic imbalance in the age and sex distribution also indicates socio-economic vulnerability. Yet, the impact of labour migration on the age structure of rural households has received only minor attention in translocal livelihood studies.³⁴

The economic livelihood strategies of households show the importance of translocal social networking both for resident and non-resident household members. Even though a translocal livelihood system has been characteristic of the northern Namibian rural way of life for decades, it was only in the early 2000s that translocal networking was identified in research literature. In the first Namibian translocal livelihood studies, interdependencies between rural and urban areas were approached from the perspective of migrants living in urban areas. The concept of translocality was adapted to the Namibian context by Frayne and Pendleton's team, who studied the relationship between rural productivity and urban survival.³⁵ Greiner found that translocality for rich families may provide a path to socio-economic upward mobility. Poor families, on the other hand, may become caught up in survivalist networks, where translocal relations entail a socio-economic downward spiral.³⁶ Levine, Berg and Yu conclude that social grants in Namibia have become a highly effective policy intervention for improving the welfare of the very poor.³⁷ Our results from the case study area in north-central Namibia confirm close interdependencies between rural and urban household members and support the findings of the previous translocal livelihood studies on Namibia.

The ability of Namibians to escape poverty depends largely on the ability to obtain wages and salaries from employment. Mendelsohn points out that people "are moving from rural

³⁴ Victoria Hosegood, Justus Benzler and Geoff C. Solarsh, "Population mobility and household dynamics in rural South Africa: Implications for demographic and health research", *Southern African Journal of Demography*, 10 (1/2), 2005: 43-68; Victoria Hosegood and Ian M. Timaeus, "Household composition and dynamics in KwaZulu Natal, South Africa: Mirroring social reality in longitudinal data collection", in: Etienne van de Walle, (ed.), *African Households: Censuses and Surveys*, New York, Sharpe, 2006: 58-77; Camlin et al., "Gendered".

³⁵ Frayne, "Rural"; Wade Pendleton, Jonathan Crush and Ndeyapo Nickanor, "Migrant Windhoek: Rural-urban migration and food security in Namibia", *Urban Forum*, 25, 2014: 191-205.

³⁶ Greiner, "Migration".

³⁷ Sebastian Levine, Servaas van der Berg and Derek Yu, "The impact of cash transfers on household welfare in Namibia", *Development Southern Africa*, 28 (1), 2011: 39-59.

areas to urban lifestyles in search of cash security, not food security.”³⁸ The fact is that in the modern world, cash is needed for necessities such as clothing, safe water, sanitation, electricity, mobile phones, transport, medical care, education and hired labour. However, Nickanor’s team show that a large number of urban households, especially in rapidly growing informal settlements, suffer a significant degree of food insecurity.³⁹ Since in urban areas most food has to be purchased, it constitutes a significant expense along with other costs of living. Moreover, even agricultural households experience food shortage and have to use cash income and social grants for food supplies.⁴⁰ On the other hand, services provided by the rural household members, such as child fostering, play a substantial role from the social security point of view.

Conclusions

In sub-Saharan Africa, circular migration has been the dominant form of population mobility. A relatively new trend in circular migration is the increasing participation of rural women in the labour market in urban centres. In Namibia, the system of circular migration was created during the apartheid era. Until the 1990s, primarily men engaged in migrant work, but from then onwards the number of women relocating for work has increased. The most visible indication of translocality in Namibia is the demographic imbalance in the age and sex distribution among the resident population both in urban and rural areas. Economically active persons, particularly able-bodied males and also an increasing number of females, were virtually absent in many of the visited homesteads of north-central Namibia. Yet migration to urban centres had not broken the migrants’ connections to their household members in rural areas. Our findings indicate close interconnection between the resident rural household members and the non-resident urban members. Material flows of foodstuffs from rural areas to urban centres and flows of consumer goods and remittances from urban centres to rural households were visible indicators of the close interconnection. Male migrant workers in particular wanted to move back to their home village on retirement. Interpretation of aerial photography reveals that since the 1940s, deforestation in the case study area has been modest and limited to the clearing of land for cultivation and housing, which suggests that environmental change has not been the prime accelerator of migration. Our empirical evidence from north-central Namibia shows that circular migration has become an essential part of the adaptation strategy of rural households in a changing socio-economic environment. In this context, the improvement of women’s land rights indicates change towards a more gender-equal society.

³⁸ John Mendelsohn, “What is land reform all about, or what could it be?”, in: *Land and Livelihoods in Namibia: Essays from the Economic Association of Namibia*, Windhoek, EAN, 2018: 52-54 (50), <https://ean.org.na/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/EAN-Land-and-Livelihoods-2018-small.pdf>

³⁹ Nickanor et al., *Food Security*.

⁴⁰ See NSA, *Namibia Census of Agriculture 2013/14: Communal Sector Revised Report*, Windhoek, NSA, 2019: 68-78, https://d3rp5jatom3eyn.cloudfront.net/cms/assets/documents/Namibia_Census_of_Agriculture_2013_14_Revised_Report.pdf

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