

Diversification of livelihood strategies of households in selected communal areas in Namibia



INTRODUCTION

Livelihoods of rural households in communal areas in Namibia are constrained by low rainfall with high variability and low soil fertility. Thus, neither agricultural intensification is an option for livelihood improvement, nor land expansion, which is restricted by the land tenure system. Additionally, the reduction of state subsidies increased the cash demand in Namibian rural areas. Under those conditions, diversification of activities is a strategy to cope with a temporary crisis, minimising risks, and helping to maintain livelihoods in uncertain environments.

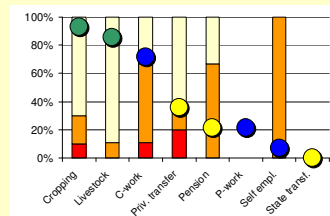
This study aims at exemplarily describing the diversification strategies of a mixed and two pastoral systems in Namibia.



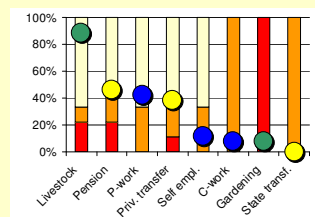
MATERIAL AND METHODS

Embedded within the BIOTA-project, three community surveys were conducted in 2001 and 2003 by semi-structured interviews and personal observation, covering 12 of 14 households in Mutumbo (mixed system in the north, see Figure 1), 26 of 29 households in Okamboro, and all 27 households in the five Nabaos-communities (pastoral systems, central and south Namibia respectively).

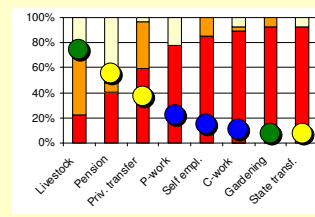
Fig. 1: Location of the Namibian communities: Mutumbo, Okamboro and Nabaos-communities



A) Mutumbo



B) Okamboro



C) Nabaos-communities

Fig. 2: Frequency of households using specific sources of income (dots), and their perceived importance (bars) in three communities

P-work: permanent employment; C-work: part time employment; priv. transfer: private transfer; self empl.: small enterprises, pension: old age pension

Dots: ● by use of natural resources; ○ other than natural resources; ● active income

Bars: ■ very; ■ medium, □ unimportant

RESULTS

The observed driving forces for diversification are listed in Figure 3. Diversification was related to several cropping activities, the keeping of multi-species herds (cattle, goats, sheep, and also donkeys in the Nabaos-communities), and receiving income from off-farm sources, either with active involvement or passively benefiting. Figure 2 shows a contrary trend between the percentage of household generating incomes from specific sources and the perceived importance of these income sources. Especially active income generation sources were highly ranked, but difficult to achieve.

Mutumbo, north Namibia Farmers in Mutumbo kept cattle (23% oxen) and goats, and few sheep. Additionally, they carried out multi-cropping (different varieties of millet, as well as sorghum, beans, melons, groundnuts, maize, and e.g. local spinach), which served as a risk minimizing strategy to secure food supply under uncertain rainfall conditions. Part-time wage employment on farms was carried out by 71% of the households in 2001, most likely due to a poor millet harvest. Cattle were sold only in cases of emergency and cash demands in order to compensate for food shortage, or to pay the water fees. Besides the poor infrastructure and the far distance to markets, lack of sufficient labour force seemed to be an important limiting factor for the extension of fields or the increase of livestock numbers, because grazing and land were accessible in sufficient amounts.

Okamboro, central Namibia Okamboro is a Herero-community, which are traditional cattle farmers (Figure 4). Livestock keeping was mentioned as the predominant activity by 88.5% of the households, but cattle were hardly ever sold (3.8% of the total herd), goats were more regularly slaughtered. Relatively good infrastructure and a nearby urban centre provided wage labour opportunities via work migration and thus absenteeism (23% of the households). Absentee farmers invested parts of their salary in livestock. Livestock numbers increased, involving a high risk of rangeland degradation.

Nabaos-communities, south Namibia In this Nama-community farmers keep mainly goats, and few sheep. Donkeys-carts are important for transport. Eighty-six percent of the households sold goats, which amounted to 17% of the goat flock; 8% of the goats were slaughtered. On the second and third position in Figure 2 passive income sources such as old age pension and private transfer were found, point at older people within the community, higher poverty, but a strong social network. Of higher importance were permanent wage labour and self employment, as well as casual work. Twenty-six percent of the households were absentees - an urban centre is nearby.

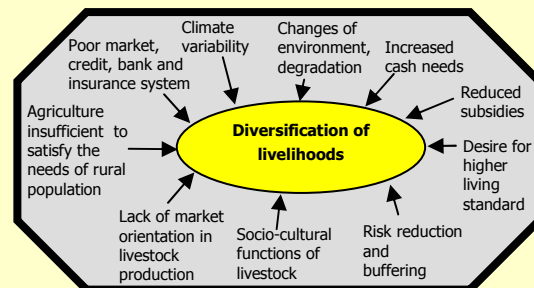


Fig. 3: Driving forces for the diversification of livelihoods



Fig. 4: Milking in Okamboro

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The fact that although livestock were kept by most of the households, their importance for the households' livelihood was not perceived as high, suggests, that livestock have prominent functions other than economic. Livestock function as a buffer against uncertainty and is of social-religious importance. Not only relying on livestock should be seen as positive as natural resources are limited, especially in the two pastoral areas. Options for wage labour depended on the location of the communities, whereas the trend towards absenteeism could be seen as a threat as absent people might perceive less the ecological limitations tending to overstock the richer they will become. Around 50% of the households received pension payments in the pastoral systems, which were crucial for survival as well as the social network. Depending on such pensions is obviously not sustainable, calling for even more options of diversification than those already in place.