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Rangeland Governance, Grazing Access and Livestock Management in Semi-arid Namibia: Evidence from Eiseb Communal Conservancy

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Introduction

In semi-arid Namibia, communal rangelands support livestock production and rural livelihoods, while variable rainfall makes access to spatially dispersed grazing resources particularly important (UNCCD 2024). Grazing access is shaped by customary institutions, land legislation and conservation arrangements. These institutions coexist rather than simply replacing one another (Gargallo, 2020; Werner, 2021). Colonial land dispossession and subsequent land reforms have reshaped tenure and land use.

Following independence in 1990, the Nature Conservation Amendment Act (1996) enabled communal conservancies, while the Communal Land Reform Act (2002) formalised aspects of customary land administration and established Communal Land Boards. Yet conservancy governance and authority over communal grazing land are not identical. Their overlapping institutional settings warrant attention to how rules are applied in practice (Ruppel & Ruppel-Schlichting, 2022; Werner, 2021).

Despite these governance changes, customary livestock farming practices continue to play a central role in daily land use within communal rangelands. However, there is still limited understanding of how shifting rangeland governance arrangements, particularly land redistribution after independence, the introduction of communal conservancy policies, and customary systems, have influenced grazing practices, local livelihoods, and community adaptation strategies. This study examines how community members in Eiseb Communal Conservancy, eastern Namibia, perceive changes in rangeland governance, grazing access and livestock management. It combines a review of historical and legal developments with local accounts of changes in fencing, mobility and access to grazing resources.

Methods

A qualitative case study was conducted in Eiseb Conservancy in the Omaheke Region, a semi-arid Kalahari sandveld landscape where livestock farming is an important livelihood. Archival materials from the Namibia National Archives and national policies and legislation were reviewed to reconstruct major institutional changes. Key informants from organisations involved in natural resource management were interviewed to contextualise formal responsibilities.

Community perspectives were explored through semi-structured interviews with narrative questions, involving herders, elders and long-term residents selected purposively and through referrals. A total of 20 semi-structured narrative interviews with community members were conducted. Interviews were audio-recorded, repeatedly listened to and manually summarised rather than transcribed verbatim. Recurring themes concerning land access, fencing, institutions and livestock practices were compared with documentary evidence. Accordingly, findings are presented as reported experiences and perceptions, not as representative population estimates.

Results and Discussion

Evolution of Rangeland Governance Policies in Namibia

Customary arrangements governed land use before colonial dispossession and segregation under German and South African rule. After independence, communal land reform sought to address tenure insecurity and strengthen land administration. The 1996 Nature Conservation Amendment Act provided for communal conservancies, and the 2002 Communal Land Reform Act defined roles for traditional authorities and Communal Land Boards (Werner, 2021; Ruppel & Ruppel-Schlichting, 2022). These changes created several partly overlapping arenas of decision-making rather than one unified rangeland governance system. Figure 1 presents a timeline of the evolution land governance in Namibia.

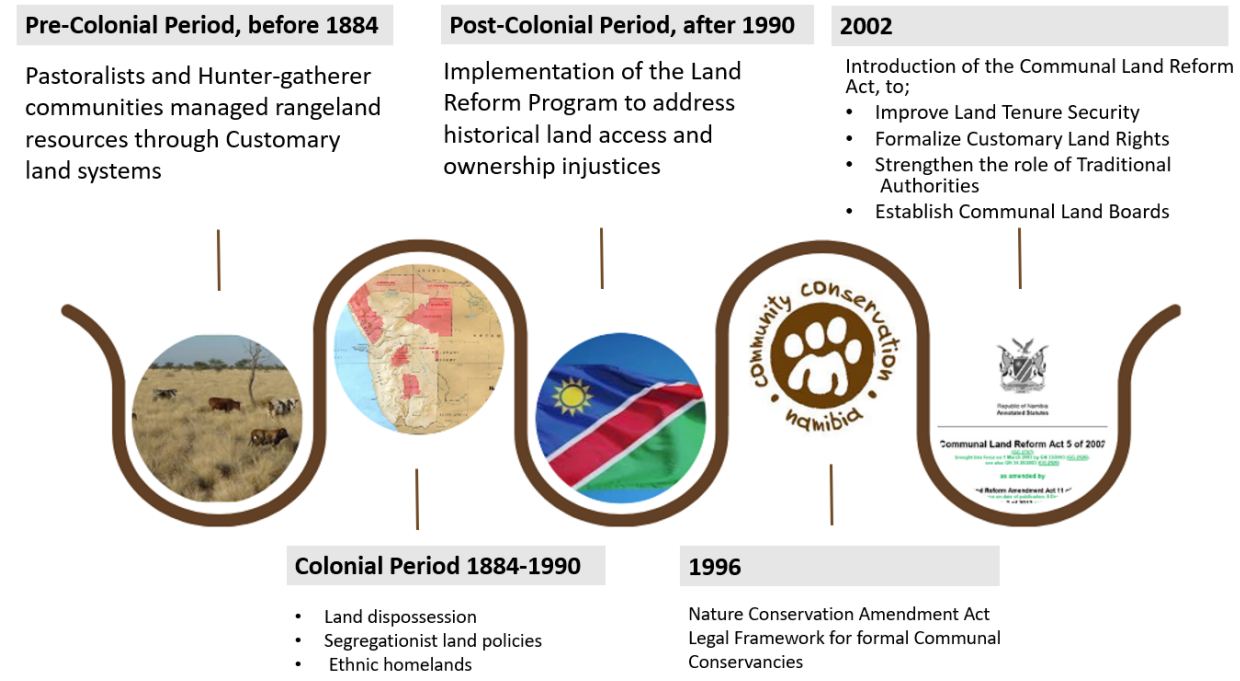


Figure 1: Timeline showing evolution of changes in rangeland governance in Namibia.

Key legislations and policy frameworks, Institutions and actors influencing rangeland use

The documentary review and interviews identify ministries, traditional authorities, Communal Land Boards, conservancy bodies and non-governmental organisations as relevant actors. Their responsibilities differ: conservancy institutions primarily concern wildlife and related benefits, whereas communal land allocation and customary rights involve traditional authorities and land boards. Interviewees described uncertainty about responsibilities and insufficient action against unauthorised fencing. These accounts point to problems of coordination and enforcement, but do not by themselves establish the extent of institutional misconduct.

This distinction matters because the creation of a conservancy does not automatically transfer authority over communal land allocation to the conservancy committee. Land governance involves different legal mandates and local practices, which may be difficult for resource users to navigate. Participants' complaints about unaddressed fencing suggest that formal responsibilities do not necessarily translate into effective responses on the ground. At the same time, the evidence does not establish which institution failed in any particular case. The findings instead underline the importance of coordination between land boards, traditional authorities and conservancy representatives when grazing access is disputed.

Local experiences reveal declining access and reduced mobility

Participants repeatedly described a transition from relatively open grazing areas towards a landscape increasingly divided by fences. They associated fencing with blocked livestock routes, reduced access to shared grazing and more difficult movement between pastures. The reported consequences include greater competition for accessible grazing and longer journeys to find forage. Respondents also mentioned rainfall variability, declining grasses, increasing woody vegetation and growing livestock and human populations as additional pressures; these changes cannot be attributed to fencing alone.

Mobility is especially relevant in a landscape where forage availability varies across space and seasons. In the interviews, respondents contrasted earlier opportunities to move cattle between grazing areas with present-day restrictions. Their descriptions suggest that the significance of fencing lies not only in the area enclosed but also in its location relative to routes and shared resources. The study does not quantify changes in travel distances or livestock productivity, so these implications should be understood as reported constraints rather than measured production effects.

"*There were no fences, livestock was grazing freely they go and come back freely. Later they started fences. Then the grazing area was full of fences*."
Interview participant, Eiseb Conservancy (traditional authority)

Interviewees distinguished livestock-management reasons for smaller enclosures such as separating bulls, protecting animals from predators and acclimatising purchased cattle, from the enclosure of extensive grazing areas. They reported that some fences exceeded authorised limits and perceived favouritism, informal land claims and weak enforcement as contributing factors. Such allegations should be understood as participants' accounts rather than independently verified legal findings.

Accounts of fencing also illustrate the tension between individual livestock-management strategies and collective grazing needs. Small enclosures may serve practical husbandry purposes, but respondents were particularly concerned about extensive fenced camps that interrupt access to areas previously used by multiple herds. A fence can therefore affect livestock keepers beyond the person who erected it, especially where it cuts across routes connecting grazing areas and water. Interview accounts alone cannot determine the legality of individual fences, but they indicate how land allocation and enforcement are experienced locally.

"We are allowed to have 50 ha fenced off but some people put up camps that are 40 km long."
Interview participant, Eiseb Conservancy

A separate mapping exercise based on digitised visible fences in satellite imagery estimated that more than 27% of the conservancy area was fenced. This estimate provides spatial context but does not establish whether each fence is lawful, when it was constructed or how much grazing is effectively inaccessible. Together with interview accounts, it indicates that fencing has become a central concern for communal access and livestock mobility.

The interviews also suggest that restrictions are unevenly experienced. Households relying on shared grazing routes may face difficulties when access is interrupted, whereas those able to establish private camps can secure particular areas for their own livestock. This contrast is relevant to equity in communal land use, although the study did not systematically compare households by herd size or wealth. The findings therefore point to a need to examine who can obtain or maintain access to grazing resources, rather than treating the community as a single group with identical interests.

Conclusions

The Eiseb case illustrates a gap between the institutional framework for communal land governance and residents' experiences of grazing access. Respondents perceived expanding fences, fragmented grazing areas and constrained livestock movement, alongside pressures from environmental variability and increasing competition for resources. These findings do not demonstrate that conservancy establishment itself caused fencing; rather, they highlight how multiple land-governance institutions and uneven enforcement shape local experiences. Clearer institutional responsibilities, transparent land allocation and meaningful participation by resource users could help protect communal access and the flexibility needed for livestock management in variable drylands.

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