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Rangeland governance, grazing access and livestock management in semi-arid Namibia: Evidence from Eiseb communal conservancy

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Abstract

Rangelands are critical for sustaining rural livelihoods in semi-arid Namibia, where pastoralism remains a dominant land-use system. However, colonial, post-colonial, and formal legal influences have reshaped patterns of land use and access, disrupting long-standing relationships with the land, while in some cases, resettlement has reconnected communities to areas of ancestral significance. This has resulted in a complex landscape of both historical ties and fragmented tenure and governance systems. This study examined how changes in rangeland governance particularly through land redistribution post independence, introduction of communal conservancy policies and customary systems have influenced rangeland and livestock management, grazing access, and local communities' perception of these changes.

The study was conducted in the Eiseb Communal Conservancy, Omaheke Region of eastern Namibia, using a qualitative case study approach. Data collection was conducted over four months combining document analysis, 4 key informant interviews, and 20 semi-structured narrative interviews with community members, thereby capturing both institutional perspectives and lived experiences.

The study found that rangeland governance in the Eiseb Conservancy is supported by a comprehensive policy and legislative framework. However, multiple actors, including government institutions, traditional authorities, and conservancy structures operate with weak coordination, overlapping mandates, and limited enforcement capacity. At the community level, increasing challenges in accessing rangeland resources are driven by a growing human population, expansion of legal and illegal fencing, land grabbing, and informal land allocation. This seems to be intensifying competition among livestock owners and the conservancy structures. These access constraints have reduced livestock mobility, fragmented grazing areas, and undermined traditional flexible grazing and herd management practices.

The findings point to a disconnect between policy intent and rangeland reality in the Eiseb Communal Conservancy: frameworks sound in conception are rendered ineffective by weak coordination and enforcement, while communities absorb the consequences through reduced access, constrained mobility, and growing livelihood insecurity.

Keywords: Fencing, institutional challenges, land fragmentation, livestock mobility, local knowledge, tenure insecurity

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