



**FARM WORKERS,
LABOUR RIGHTS, TRADE
UNIONS AND BUSH
BIOMASS IN NAMIBIA**

Herbert Jauch, 8 December 2020

Outline

- **Socio-Economic Situation: Employment, Wages and Unemployment**
- **Labour Legislation**
- **Conditions of Farm Workers**
- **The Namibia Farm Workers Union (NAFWU)**
- **Utilisation of Bush Biomass to Benefit Workers**

Socio-Economic Situation: Employment, Wages and Unemployment

- **Latest data of 2018: Overall unemployment of 34% (much higher now)**
- **Wages and salaries are the main source of household income but in rural areas 42% of households depend mainly on subsistence farming**
- **Overall, 725,742 people are employed, almost a quarter of them in agriculture, forestry and fishing (agriculture alone employs about 140,000 – 150,000)**
- **The average wage of the 3 sectors combined in N\$ 3393 per month (Euro 188)**
- **“Own account workers” predominate in the sector**
- **Few enjoy paid annual leave or paid sick leave**
- **In rural areas “informal employment” accounts for 88% of employment**

Labour legislation

Labour Act of 2007 provides for :

- **Fundamental workers rights (including freedom of association, protection against child labour and sexual harassment etc.)**
- **Basic conditions of employment (incl. hours of work, overtime payment, paid leave etc.)**
- **Trade union rights & collective bargaining requirements**
- **Dispute resolution**
- **Unfair labour practices**
- **Occupational safety and health**
- **Tripartite Labour Advisory Council etc.**

Conditions of Farm Workers

- **Farm Workers are amongst the most abused and exploited workers in Namibia**
- **Legal rights are supposed to cover them but are often ignored**
- **The concept of “own account workers” was frequently used by farmers to avoid social responsibility**
- **First minimum wage negotiated between farmers organisations and the Namibia Farm Workers Union (NAFWU) was reached in April 2003: N\$ 2.20 per hour (EURO 0.12) or N\$ 429 per month (EURO 24).**
- **Farmers were unwilling to negotiate but then conceded in the face of farm invasions in Zimbabwe**
- **Further negotiations have been very difficult with farmers being unwilling to make substantive concessions**

Conditions of Farm Workers (cont.)

- **Since 2017, the minimum wage stands at N\$ 4.26 per hour (EURO 0.24) or N\$ 900 per month (EURO 50). In addition, farmers are supposed to provide food rations or a food allowance of N\$ 500 (EURO 28) plus accommodation**
- **The legal provision for paid leave for farm workers are ignored on most farms. About 90% are “informally employed”**
- **Paternalistic and racist labour relations are widespread**
- **Most farm workers reside on the farm where they work, about half of them in corrugated iron shacks**
- **Only a minority of farm workers own life stock on the farm, usually small stock (sheep and goats)**
- **Farm workers spend on average 70% of their earnings on food**

Conditions of Farm Workers (cont.)

- **Minimum wages are not always paid although agricultural employers claimed that wages were almost N\$ 2000 per month (2017)**
- **Less than half of all farm works are registered with the Social Security Commission**
- **Work with dangerous chemicals and machines is not always accompanied by training**
- **Many farm workers live in constant fear of physical or verbal abuse and of arbitrary dismissals**
- **Frequent labour rights violations are enabled by an under-staffed labour inspectorate, the vast distribution of farms, private property rights of access and a resource-challenged trade union**
- **Generational farm workers still do not have tenure rights despite the recommendations of the “Kameeta Commission” in 1997**

Namibia Farm Workers Union (NAFWU)

- **Was established in 1994 and is affiliated to the National Union of Namibian Workers**
- **Severely constrained by lack of resources and organisational infrastructure in rural areas**
- **Was only able to recruit significant number of workers on farms where a large number of workers were employed, e.g. grape farms, dairy farms**
- **Access to workers/members on private farms is often difficult**
- **Some farmers discourage workers from joining the union**
- **Supervising conditions of employment of members is virtually impossible**

Utilisation of Bush Biomass to Benefit Workers

- Overall aim must be to create a large number of additional & decent jobs
- Local value chains to produce final products are by far the best option (charcoal, animal feed, poles, boards, school furniture etc)
- Utilising biomass for energy creation needs to be based locally
- A substantial number of harvesting jobs for young people (e.g. through the National Youth Service) can be created through semi-mechanised harvesting methods (fully mechanised harvesting creates far fewer jobs)
- Decent work aspects need to be safeguarded through a legal framework and effective enforcement mechanisms

The Tricky Bush Biomass Issues

- **Export proposal (to Hamburg or elsewhere) constitutes a continuation of colonial trading patterns and relegates Namibia to the role of the supplier of semi-processed goods for industrialised countries**
- **Large scale and long-term export agreements for bush biomass will divert the focus away from the creation of local value chains**
- **Most bush biomass will be sourced from private (mostly white) commercial farmers who will prefer fewer workers on their farms and therefore fully mechanised harvesting methods (which create few jobs)**
- **Only deliberate policy and regulatory interventions will lead to the most beneficial outcome in terms of social and economic development (i.e. large number of decent jobs)**

Thank you!