
The Unforgiving Land – Basis for a Post Liberation Programme in Namibia

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*Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future
And time future contained in time past.
All time is unredeemable
What might have been is an abstraction
Remaining a perpetual possibility
Only in a world of speculation.
What might have been and what has been
Point to one end which is always present.*

T. S. Eliot

*The first day of our political liberation is the
first day of a longer and harder struggle for
political economic liberation.*

Samora M. Machel,
President of Mozambique

Independence and the future

Namibia will be independent with an African government. The colonial economy [Green and Kiljunen forthcoming; Barthold 1977; Murray, Morris, Dugard and Rubin 1974], and the occupation regime [Kiljunen 1980] are in their death throes. Only the exact timing, the degree of destruction before independence and the modalities of transfer remain unclear. There is now a surge of medium-term strategy designing, goal setting, scenario writing about the political economy of an independent Namibia – by SWAPO and by the UN family [SWAPO 1976a, b], by observers with no stated preferences [Barthold 1977, USAID 1979], by partisans both of radical change [Green 1980] and cautious gradualism [Thomas 1978]. This is inevitable and indeed desirable – at least so long as Namibians take a lead in the process and in scrutinising the products.²

However there is a danger in the often implicit assumption that Namibia can move directly and smoothly from her colonial past and chaotic

present into long-term political economic development. What happens in the first five or ten years depends very much on what happens in the first six, 12 or 18 months. Over this period, severe constraints, both physical and political will be felt.

Structural Inheritance³

The structural inheritance of Namibia is a contradictory one. At over \$1,250 per capita GDP, it is a heritage of relatively adequate productive forces. Its two critical sources of foreign exchange – gem diamonds and uranium oxide – have good market prospects; and there is no reason to suppose that output need fall substantially in the short run. If production can be maintained – and marketed – foreign exchange and tax revenues should be among the least of the new nation's worries. Exports are about 70 per cent of GDP, surpluses (before tax) of large firms are nearly as high – about \$1,200 mn and \$1,050 mn respectively out of GDP of the order of \$1,700 mn in 1979.

But that sums up the positive side of the structural inheritance. The production mix is a virtually perfect example of an economy which produces what it does not use and uses what it does not produce. Ninety per cent of physical production is exported – 100 per cent for diamonds, minerals and karakul (which account for over 50 per cent of total and 70 per cent of non-service GDP); 90 per cent for cattle; almost 50 per cent for manufacturing (basically meat packing and fish processing). Beyond meat, milk and tinned fish Namibia is now self sufficient in nothing. Even 50 per cent of staple grain is imported in good years.

Personal income distribution is virtually on race lines. In 1979 the average European household income was of the order of \$14–15,000, and average African income \$700. The urban poverty line data suggested \$1,800 as the minimum necessary household income [Cronje, G. and S. 1979 ch 5]. Of an economically active population of over 500,000 in 1977, about 475,000 were African (including 'Coloured'). But of that 475,000, 240,000 were in pseudo-subsistence agriculture (two per cent of

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² It is useless to pretend that the USA can avoid having a policy toward and preferences about Namibia or that 'economic liberalism' will have no internal or external backers. Better that the premises and scenarios be set out, published, open to examination and criticism.

³ For more detailed data see Green, 1979; UNIN 1978 and – from a somewhat less critical stance – Thomas 1978.

GDP) and another 75,000 or so in domestic service (19 per cent of GDP). *Per contra*, of administrators, proprietors, professional/technical/para-professional occupations, 20,000 of 27,000 were European and almost 5,000 of the Africans were primary school teachers and nurses.

The currency is the Rand; the banks – with a minor exception – are branches of South African units. The key operating companies are transnational corporations. One – Anglo American – engrosses diamonds, a chunk of base metals, fish processing and export, much of karakul export and a mélange of subsidiary activities. RTZ, Amax-Newmont, Falconbridge (mining) and the South African state (cattle marketing, railways–harbours–telecommunications, much rail transport, power and water, a dominant interest in several mines and co-dominance with RTZ of Rossing) round off the ‘gang of five’ (or nine adding in Standard and Barclays, Shell and BP) which dominate productive activity. Very few enterprises in Namibia are complete: it has not been treated as a territorial economy but as a corner of South Africa where it was convenient to carry on some aspects of South African business. CDM’s diamond sorting and valuing, the main Railway workshops, Tsumeb’s (Amax-Newmont’s) copper refinery, the processing and auction of karakul pelts – all are located in the Republic.

Exports (apart from uranium oxide and some base metals) are largely through the Republic and are handled by South African-based firms. Eighty per cent of cattle are sold to the Republic as live beasts. This may help the railway and South African packing plants, but is hardly cost efficient or a base from which to shift markets. Imports are 90 per cent through and 70 per cent from the Republic; for maize and petroleum products as well as coal and mining machinery, locating alternative sources promptly is likely to be difficult. This is hardly alleviated by the fact that importing is a preserve of South African-based firms.

The patterns of services and of infrastructure are as distorted as personal income. There is no usable national language at present – the Boers’ conduct has ruled out Afrikaans, English, ‘the language of freedom’, is not widely spoken, no Namibian language is broadly national. African education is deplorable in quantity (especially beyond primary) and quality, as are African health services. Productive services – eg agricultural planning and extension – are virtually ‘for whites only’. Of 35,000 boreholes 34,500 are in European, 500 in African areas. There is, however, an all-weather road network in African areas – to allow the army to

move to combat liberation forces. There is also a good vaccination service for African cattle – to ensure that they are not reservoirs of contagion for the European ranches.

History and the Future

These facts might seem to suggest a need for ‘gradualism’ – an attempt to repeat the past colonial history of Kenya, with South Africa in the role of the UK and SWAPO (or some ‘responsible’ substitute) in the role of KANU. At least one seriously argued treatise makes the case for such a strategy [Thomas 1978]. But there is no such option.

The colonial history of Namibia is one of theft – theft of sovereignty, of land, of residence and labour rights [Clarence-Smith and Moorson 1975; Segal and First 1967]. The ‘choice’ given to Namibians has been to work on white terms or to starve. The Africans have been herded into reserves which cannot provide subsistence but can provide places for families to stay and scratch out some food and shelter. Combined with the single migrant worker ‘contract’ system, they have allowed payment of sub-subsistence wages and have corroded African households and societies. They have also forged a unity of workers and peasants (most adult male Namibians have been both), provided mobilising grounds in the prison-like compounds for ‘contract’ workers (into which police now dare go only in riot squad strength), created a worker consciousness which is also a national consciousness, built in the *raison d’être* and provided the initial organising and recruiting grounds for the Liberation Movement [Cronje 1979: ch V; *South African Labour Bulletin*, 1978; 4-1, 2].

Similarly, except in the north and north-east, 90 per cent of the usable land is in 6,500 or so European ranches. Their average income is perhaps \$30,000 gross and \$15,000 net. They employ an average of about 10 Africans (at least half of whom are men separated from their families and/or seasonally employed) paid perhaps \$350 a year including payment in kind.

Three key mines – Rossing (uranium), Oamites (copper) and Otjihase (copper) – date from since 1966 when the Mandate was revoked. In terms of the 1971 World Court ruling, these constitute not mines with lawful mineral rights but – quite literally – grand larceny, and purchase from them can be interpreted as ‘receiving’ within the meaning of the law.⁴

⁴ While more cautiously worded this is the conclusion of Commonwealth Secretariat, 1978.

The history of repression, of trickery, of violence – from the German wars of reconquest which gave the world the term genocide, to the virtually equally brutal South African battle to regain the illegally occupied territory – has left an indelible set of constraints. ‘Moderation’ is no longer a marketable product in Namibia.

SWAPO’s programmes give some indication of the historically and politically possible. They are adamant on principles and goals:

transition to a socialist mode of production – immediate nationalisation of land, mineral and fishing rights, of South African state property and of illegally acquired assets. Joint ventures and TNC operations to operate within a Namibian framework.

Land to the tillers. The abolition of all forms of exploitation of man by man . . . and aggrandisement of wealth and power by individuals, groups or classes. Greater equality – including universal access to basic health and education and to pure water. Opportunities for full productive employment.

Abolition of ‘contract’ labour, child labour, ‘humiliating servant systems’. Right of workers to organise and to have an effective voice in all decisions directly affecting them.

Sever all relations with the South African racist regime until there is a democratic government in that country based on the principles of majority rule. [SWAPO 1976].

The ideology underlying the programme is spelled out by Kiljunen in this *Bulletin*. But while the principles are firm, as is the sense of urgency, careful reading (and talking to SWAPO cadres) suggests a genuine perception of the structural constraints and acceptance of the need to set priorities and use flexibility in tactics. Joint ventures, not 100 per cent nationalisation, are envisaged; the severance of relations with South Africa is not seen as an overnight event but as a process. There is no inclination to seek autarchy; the need for a considerable corps of expatriates (acceptable to and largely chosen by Namibia) is recognised; the problems of training, providing basic services and altering institutional patterns are not glossed over. The programmes are radical but, unlike ‘gradualism, they are also potentially realistic.

Constraints on Policy

Namibia does have a relatively high achieved level of productive forces. It also has the potential for

increasing and altering the composition of its Gross Domestic Product. Because of present inequalities and the absence of an entrenched African elite, it has a remarkably high potential surplus for reconstruction and development investment, for productive services (eg education, health, pure water), for meeting urgent social requirements (eg the housing and urban infrastructure requirements of ‘ending contract’ and reuniting African families at workplaces). But it also inherits a very fragile set of structures, a great danger of things going wrong, a very hard and unforgiving set of constraints. Namibia’s *ecology* is fragile [Wellington 1955; FAO 1977]. Failure to rotate herds, overstocking, breakdown of boreholes can all quickly lead to rapid and potentially irreversible degradation of grass, to erosion and desertification. As the fishing industry has been devastated [*Africa Contemporary Record* 1977-78 and 1978-79; *The Star* 1978], so could the ranching sector go – and without the same capacity for revival after a moderate ‘rest period’.

The *technology* of the core of the economy – mining, ranching, urban water supply – has little tolerance for error. Misuse of machinery and failure either to enforce or educate workers to internalise safety codes would not merely (and disastrously) reduce GDP, exports and surplus. It could also kill people. Mozambique knows that to its cost from experience in coal. Ranching in Namibia is centrally planned in detail – land use, water supply, rotation of grazing [Nixon 1978]. There is little tolerance in the nature of the ecology for trial and error. Windhoek depends for much of its urban water on purified sewage run through one of the world’s most technically sophisticated plants. A small error could mean a full-scale cholera epidemic throughout the urban area in which up to one fifth of the nation’s people live.

The *production mix* is not – in the short run – malleable nor are its end uses. Gem diamonds, uranium oxide, copper-lead-zinc, karakul, levels of meat or fish even approaching those now achieved can be consumed only by export. (Meat and fish production is of the order of 2 kg per day per man, woman, child and infant.) They must be marketed effectively or the potential surplus will be lost, and the bulk of wage employment and rural incomes put in grave jeopardy. Equally both present production and investment to alter it – not least in irrigation to build up food production – are heavily dependent on imports. Indeed, without basic food and fuel imports Namibians would starve; no retreat to pure subsistence is possible in much of the country.

The *personnel* structure is equally hard to alter. Skill requirements cannot be reduced radically. The ecology, technology and production mix set stark constraints – as do the new requirements of independence. Because of the history of Namibia many posts must be expatriate for a time. The projected requirement of 15,000 is daunting absolutely but, as a cut from 36,500 economically active Europeans today, it is a daunting challenge too [UNIN 1978]. Moreover, many of the present Europeans will not be welcome or indeed willing to stay for more than the briefest of periods.

Namibia's *history* is equally unforgiving. The political economy of theft, of blood and iron, of fire and the sword means that radical changes must be made and be seen to be made rapidly. There is no longer any room for gradualism on land and mineral rights, nationalisation, on limiting (and being seen to limit) the power of TNCs, on ending the migrant labour system, on making rapid progress in raising African incomes, on placing Namibians in key posts.

Lastly the geographic location – or *geopolitical setting* – is hostile and unforgiving. South Africa is a neighbour with many kinds of residual leverage. Not least of these are its claims to Walvis Bay and the fact that the critical diamond industry will be within the range of South African guns on the other side of the Orange River estuary. Nor can one suppose that there will be much real understanding, let alone mutual respect between the two states.

A Checklist of Priorities

In the initial year of independence there will be a need to allocate energy, attention, resources to what is immediately essential. Most of what is merely desirable will have to be postponed. What are the key items?

- Keeping *mineral* production going – notably in diamonds, uranium, and the main copper-lead-zinc mines. This is the backbone of government revenue, export earnings and investable surplus. Its output is readily saleable – and for diamonds and uranium oxide readily exportable by air. The mineral TNCs are used to being forced to renegotiate historic unequal contracts. There are alternative operators to be had if existing companies will not accept reasonable new arrangements.
- *Ranching* is the heart of rural production. Together with mining, it is critical to employment. It is likely to be hit by cattle exodus or killing – unless perhaps SWAPO publicly agrees

to pay market value for cattle and created assets which are turned over in good order, and to prosecute for sabotage. If the industry is in reasonable working order, it will face marketing problems; more packing facilities (or possibly cattle boats to the Middle East) and new markets will be needed.

- It is only too evident that the *fishing* fleet will be in Table Bay, not Walvis Bay, on the day the latter becomes Namibian. To save jobs in the processing industry, contract fishing, training for skippers, boat building (abroad and at the Walvis bay base) are urgent necessities. So are conservation measures inshore and to a 200 mile limit to allow restoration of fish stocks (see above).
- Additions to *basic services* will be required. An acceptable national language (presumably English) must be taught. Adult education – especially rough and ready gap filling and upgrading courses – must have top priority so that the number of expatriates can be rapidly reduced from 36,500 to 15,000. The ground must be laid for radical expansion of the educational system. Health services – especially vaccination, health education, preventive medicine, first aid – must be made available nationally; these will build on the experience of Zambia and Angola, and 'semi-liberated' area clinics and first aid teams.
- With the end of contract labour, 100,000 families will seek to be re-united at places of work. Most will wish to move rapidly. The *urban layout* and *services* as well as the *construction* (even on an artisanal plus communal basis) of say the first quarter of the homes needed during the first year is a minimum requirement to retain credibility and to avoid the instant creation of permanent urban slums to replace the prison compound and shack pattern.
- *Personnel* must be mobilised more vigorously and allocated more carefully than any other resource. Every Namibian with a special skill is a scarce asset. Namibians must hold and be seen to hold power. Not to do so would render land reform unacceptable no matter how technically desirable it might be as a first step. Use of expert technical support teams, each servicing a score of ranches with Namibian production level management, might be feasible. But expatriates in a wide range of positions will be needed and will have to be identified, recruited, supervised – and promptly fired if unsuitable.
- *Income distribution* will pose problems. African wages and salaries must be raised, but not to

present European levels (which Namibia could not afford). Because separate scales by race must be ended – a different thing from separate scales for expatriates – a dilemma will exist in respect of would-be citizens of European ancestry. It will be necessary to raise agricultural incomes (by redistribution in ranching and by initial measures to raise productivity and prices for field crops) to avert a wholesale rural exodus and to avoid a huge urban/rural income gap.

- The *public sector* will need to be large, quick on its feet and business-like. It must be dominant in finance (beginning with a central bank) and external trade (beginning with marketing, ranching and fishing products and organising critical imports). It will also need to encompass ex-South African stata/parastatal production units and any other key enterprises whose ex-owners have been expelled or who have abandoned them (including probably at least one of the major post-1966 mines). All this will require the creation of Namibian controlled institutions, even if these have to be staffed initially by expatriate technical agents.

To What End ?

This analysis of the short-term challenges of political independence is not a counsel for 'moderation', 'gradualism' or 'pragmatism'. Such a tactical approach would almost certainly fail to meet the challenges and destroy the political capital of any leadership which sought to follow it. Nor is it a plea for a return to a quasi-traditional way of life as a new starting point. Namibia never was Arcadia; any attempt to go back to 'before the Germans came' would be suicidal. But nor is it a counsel of despair. Namibia has degrees of freedom. It has a people united as well as deprived by its history, a leadership and cadres used to the long haul and the hard slog of the liberation struggle. The appropriate approach may be that of Antonio Gramsci: 'pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will'.

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