

Title: Water from a community and social developmental perspective

Presentation for the Breakfast meeting of the Namibian Economic Society on
“Water – Is it a blessing or a curse for Namibia?”

written by

Rev. Dr. Claudia Haarmann &

Rev. Dr. Dirk Haarmann

Desk for Social Development¹

Evangelical Lutheran Church in the Republic of Namibia (ELCRN)

P.O. Box 5069

Windhoek

Namibia

Email: cd.haarmann@gmx.net

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1.1. Introduction

First of all I would like to thank NES for the opportunity to present here today. When I received the topic, "Water - Is it a blessing or a curse for Namibia?" I was not sure, in which capacity I should approach the topic: Whether I was invited as a Pastor of the ELCRN, or somebody with a Social Development background. Let me start this contribution to the Namibian Economic Society from the *theological* side: The question posed here today is in itself a strong statement. The one who is blessing or cursing is God. Therefore I am glad to start of from the premise, that water is a God given good!

In the following, I will try to stay in line with the role, which was assigned to me in the programme as a so-called "social activist", but I would like to come back to this theological premise as well.

The basis of this contribution is the analysis of participatory research, which the Desk for Social Development has done together with congregations and communities in Namibia. One of the more narrow foci of the work of the DfSD is to look into "The reality of life in a Squatter Camp". This presentation draws on some of the findings of this ongoing participatory research.

The key question from a community perspective is still, irrespective of occasional good rains or floods, the question of *access to water*.

1.2. Access to water: Experience of people on the ground

In some communities, a **communal tap** is shared by a certain number of households. A so-called Water Committee collects the money from the different households to pay for the water collectively. Obviously, people experience problems with this kind of arrangement:

- In order to monitor the access to the tap, the tap is only opened during certain hours, which is very inconvenient.
- The Water Committee says that people are not paying enough and then the tap is closed and no water is available. In turn, the households are saying that the money is 'pocketed' by the Water Committee members and not paid over to the municipality.
- Tragedies and emergencies like fires are seriously exacerbated due to the inaccessibility of water.

The other system used is the **communal pre-paid taps**.

Again, people are facing serious issues

- Basically, the system means: No money → no water! Regardless of whether it is needed for drinking, cooking, washing or gardening etc.
- Water taps could be very far way from the various houses or no water taps are provided at all like in Otjimuiise 3. People have to walk to another area, in this case Otjimuiise 2, in order to get water.

- In the case of breaking of pipes or leakages, the water is often closed off completely and people have to wait for a long time until it is fixed. Again, they are cut off from their access to water.
- In some areas, communal toilets are located next to the water tap. A blockage of the toilet, which does happen, has implications on the quality of the water as the area around the toilet is contaminated: The result is poor, unsafe and unhealthy water for the community. On a bigger scale, people have reported about the poor and unsafe quality of the Goreangab Dam water: the area near the dam is used as toilets, people wash their clothes or go for a swim in the dam, children are drowning etc.
- Again, in the event of a fire: Access to life saving water is not guaranteed.

A third issue is the practice of cutting off water as a means to retrieve payment for municipality services in **formal housing areas. The water bill** is part of the overall municipality's bill that includes the account for street cleaning, refuse removal, and sewerage. In case of non-payment, the municipalities resort to cutting-off the water of households. It is somehow comprehensible from the side of the municipalities that they look for means to achieve payment compliance for all services. However, denying somebody access to safe drinking water, is deny-

ing somebody the right to life and removes the dignity of people. The consequences of this practise are hence manifold and far reaching. To name but a few:

- It has serious health implications: People have to resort to unhealthy unsafe water, which exacerbate health problems, undermines national health efforts and ultimately just shifts the problem to health costs.
- The inevitable occurring debt circle leads people to loose their formal housing and having to move to informal settlements with all social ills associated to it.
- It also has serious economic consequences: The debt circle sucks up any potential to actively participate in economic activity.

The practice is hence devastating households and can be described as an unreasonable measurement for the sake of cost-recovery or sustainability.

1.3. Conclusion

The presentation has highlighted water-related problems experienced by the poorer communities in Namibia. It is obvious that high-quality water management and the preservation of this previous good is needed not only in Namibia, but on a global scale. A top priority from a community perspective is to have access to safe drinking water.

Bishop Dr. Z. Kameeta once asked: How can you charge for something that you need like the air to breathe and that God has created and that is not produced? In this line and based on the serious problems related to the access and the provision of safe drinking water in Namibia, I would like to argue that free basic water supply is a basic human right that cannot be denied. Namibia should take seriously into account the leading example of other countries like South Africa to provide a fixed amount of free safe water to their whole population. A free universal provision of a minimum water supply for people to live from is needed and would solve some of the serious issues currently faced by Namibians.

Secondly, the policy of cutting-off water as a cost-recovery measurement is unacceptable and needs to be abandoned. A cross subsidisation from the rich to the poor households is not only a humanitarian but also an economic prerequisite to build a healthy, stable and productive nation. This can only be achieved, if also an effective mechanism of cross-subsidisation from the richer to the poorer communities and municipalities can be implemented. In this way, cost-recovery and sustainability in the provision of water to the nation is possible.

1 The Desk for Social Development (DfSD) has been set up in May 2003, as an institution of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in the Republic of Namibia (ELCRN) in order to address issues of mass-poverty especially given the effects of the HIV/AIDS pandemic. The DfSD is tasked to look at the broader social effects and at the root causes of poverty and HIV and AIDS, because it is evident that poverty fuels the spread of HIV and vice versa HIV and AIDS is deepening poverty even further. The church through the Desk for Social Development takes an active role in fighting mass poverty by strategic interventions in society. Claudia and Dirk Haarmann are the Project Directors of the DfSD since 2003.