



## Factsheet # 13

# Collaboration and Collective Learning to Sustain Freehold Farms



## Challenge

- Freehold farms in Namibia face growing challenges due to climate change (e.g. recurring droughts), economic change (e.g. rising input costs), and ecological change (e.g. land degradation). Many are asking: how long can we keep our farms running?
- While the debate about the future of freehold farms tends to focus predominantly on agronomic and economic aspects – such as rangeland management and diversification through wildlife management – the crucial role of the community of freehold farmers is often overlooked.
- While neighborhood assistance remains robust, the practice of collective learning and knowledge exchange has significantly diminished over time.
- Since Namibian independence, government support has declined as state priorities shifted toward communal farmers who had been historically neglected. Therefore, freehold farmers began to build partnerships within their communities to create their own infrastructure to meet emerging needs, for example by constructing a cooperative slaughterhouse and establishing security networks.

## Approach

- Our research focused on freehold farms in the broader Waterberg area in Namibia, which are individually owned and managed. Emerging farmers were not part of the study.
- The analysis was based on in-depth interviews with freehold farmers, allowing us to capture a range of experiences and perspectives on the challenges they face.

## Change in freehold farmers community support

- Historically, the success of freehold farms in the region was strongly supported by neighborhood assistance – including mutual help in areas such as firefighting – and collective learning within the freehold farming community. Several learning platforms existed also due to government support.

## Declining Collective Learning and Knowledge Exchange

- Formal knowledge networks such as local Namibia Agricultural Union (NAU) meetings, collective study groups, and other social organizations (e.g. Forum of German-speaking Namibians) have lost significance due to time pressure, economic burdens, and increasing individualism. This has weakened the sense of community.
- With the rise of informal, virtual exchange channels through social media, knowledge is shared on local, national, and international levels. This results in a decrease in community gatherings, reducing face-to-face interaction.
- The migration of younger generations to urban areas in search of better job opportunities increases the risk of lacking generational succession, which in turn leads to a loss of traditional farming knowledge.



**Figure 1:** In the past, local study groups fostered knowledge exchange and collaborative ecological monitoring of specific farm sites. (Photo credit: Marlen Britsch)

## Practical and Policy Implications

To tackle climate, economic and ecological change and enhance farm resilience, it is essential that freehold farmers and their associations take up the role the government fulfilled in the past. They should promote collective learning, build strong social networks, and adapt them to evolving circumstances.

- Support community structures and events
- Revitalize regular peer-to-peer learning (farmers teaching farmers) especially about coping and mitigation strategies by integrating in-person study groups (e.g. field visits, informal discussion groups) and online groups (e.g. WhatsApp)
- Establish inclusive knowledge hubs for freehold, resettlement, and communal farmers
- Create safe spaces for dialogue in the knowledge hubs (e.g. moderated meetings between farmers, NGOs, and policymakers)

## Emergence of Partnerships for Key Infrastructure

- In response to increasing theft and poaching, farmers have built local security groups. These groups have successfully implemented a shared surveillance camera system along key roads, pooling finances and resources.
- The mismanagement of meat processing and export infrastructure led to the establishment of Savanna Beef, a farmer-led cooperative slaughterhouse. Although the plant is not yet operational, the cooperative represents an important step towards self-reliance in managing critical infrastructure.

## Key Findings

- Stronger partnerships vs. declining collective learning: while collective learning among freehold farmers is declining, self-organization is emerging as a key strategy to sustain farms.
- Shift to digital knowledge exchange: knowledge exchange is moving from in-person meetings to social media, reducing depth in collaboration, though neighborhood assistance remains strong and vital.
- Long-term risks: the decline in collective learning weakens farmers' ability to adapt to challenges like climate change and market volatility, as social networks for knowledge exchange are crucial for collective problem-solving.

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## The NamTip Project

The collaborative German-Namibian research project "NamTip – A Namibian Perspective on Desertification Tipping Points in the Face of Climate Change" aims to better understand the development of ecological tipping points in dryland rangelands by assessing desertification and woody plant encroachment processes. It also explores management options for preventing such tipping points and restoring degraded rangeland ecosystems.

[www.uni-potsdam.de/en/namtip](http://www.uni-potsdam.de/en/namtip)

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