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Social meaning and material constraints of land scarcity in Northern Namibia

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Abstract

The paper scrutinizes perceptions of and discourses about scarcity of land in northern Namibia in order to show the multiple meanings that land has for the population. It is based on two years of fieldwork, and brings together interdisciplinary perspectives on why people argue that land is scare. Our research contributes to a better understanding of the meaning of land in a rapidly changing setting, in which demands for land are changing and diversified. Furthermore, new land uses have come into play, and subsistence agriculture is no longer the mainstay of livelihoods, but one of the many sources. We argue for a more nuanced concept of scarcity of land, in order to acknowledge the different meanings of access to land to different people and to improve land policies.

Keywords

Land scarcity, Meaning of Land, Resource Management, Land reform, Agricultural Development

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1 Introduction

Land access, land distribution and security of tenure are major topics in Namibia, as in many other African countries. This is evident in the country's political and public discourses, as well as the centrality of land in various national laws, specific statutory bodies and policy papers. In north-central Namibia land is often described as scarce, by both the socio-political authorities as well as by individual landholders and users. In this paper we scrutinize the different perceptions of scarcity of land in the local context.

Scarcity of land is frequently discussed in terms of agricultural productive capacity, which can be threatened in absolute terms (e.g. by population or livestock increase) (e.g. Lambin & Meyfroidt, 2011 or Gomiero, 2016). In such arguments, scarcity is discussed from the point of view of limited natural resources alone, often based on comparisons to global, national or regional averages. However, scarcity can also be discussed as a consequence of unequal distribution and limited access to resources (as has for example been prominently argued by Sen, 1981). For an in-depth discussion of the meaning of scarcity and the different narratives of scarcity see e.g. Mehta (2010), and Scoones, Smalley, Hall, Tsikata (2019). Scoones et al. (2019) identify three framings of scarcity namely, absolute, relative, and political scarcity. In their framings, absolute scarcity speaks to the physical and finite limits of resources and in relative terms, "scarcity is relative to demand" (Scoones et al., 2019, p. 234). Relative scarcity points to the fact that it is not scarcity of land, but rather insufficient economic-productive return of land as the consequence of "suboptimal" use of resources (2019, p. 234). For the third framing - political scarcity, scarcity is relational, it is constructed, politically and discursively manufactured. All those accounts for scarcity, especially absolute and relative scarcity frames are focusing on land for its direct economic-productive value and are ignoring that land has other values, as has been emphasized by Ferguson (2013) and Shipton and Goheen:

> *"The stakes in land disputes and negotiations always depend on a wider set of concerns than agriculture, livestock, or other extractive activities alone" (1992, p.309).*

We want to bring those different perspectives on scarcity of land together. We discuss whether and in which way land for agricultural production is scarce in northern Namibia, how scarcity of land is related to other kinds of resource scarcities, and what the additional reasons are behind the desire to have land. We show how in north-central Namibia, discourses of scarcity of land are based on different arguments and needs for land and that a closer look on these different needs for land is necessary in order to understand the local situation. We furthermore unravel the roles of land in shifting power relationships and implicit negotiations over the control of the areas in north-central Namibia.

Namibia's national land policy consists of two broad streams: (a) the redistribution of freehold land and (b) tenure reform in communal land. Conventionally, freehold land is privately owned and serves commercial purposes, while communal land is held on usufruct basis and was dominated by subsistence farming. However, Sherbourne notes a paradoxical change between the two, "whereby communal land is gradually becoming more commercialised while commercial land is becoming more communal" (2017, p.129). Communal land for subsistence farming is under a state of transformation with homesteads no longer being "happy islands of traditional self-sufficiency in a sea of commodified consumption" (Winterfeldt, 2013, p.9) and commercialisation of land use is increasing. On the other hand, the operating costs of farming, especially commercial farming, in Namibia are high and the returns are low. Commercial farmers are therefore viewed to increasingly "subsidise their farms from their principal source of income" (Sherborne, 2003, p.1).

This paper focuses on the dynamics around communal land. Since 2002, building on the Communal Land Reform Act, 2002 (Act No. 5 of 2002), the government of Namibia has been implementing a tenure reform programme in the communal areas. The programme aims to improve security of tenure in communal areas by means of documenting and registering land rights. The conventional understanding is that the increased sense of security of tenure will promote higher investment and more sustainable land use practices (Adams et al., 1999). This ought to reduce poverty in the rural areas in a further step. We argue, however, that the communal land reform does not take into consideration localised understandings and measures against scarcity of land. For instance, it allows

individuals to directly acquire customary land rights for 50 ha and rights of leaseholds for 100 ha, regardless of local circumstances. The provision by the law gives an impression of availability of abundant land. Some have welcomed the 50 ha as an opportunity to maximise their interests. However, the general benchmark of 50 ha does not take local heterogenous needs into consideration. While a landholding of 50 ha is small for extensive cattle farming, some Traditional Authorities (TAs) in areas who are in tune with ground reality in regards to availability of land have set limits of land allocation to 5 ha. While, the Communal Land Reform Act as amended allows for 50 ha or more for registration provided that the Ministry has approved, the issue of egalitarianism comes in through requiring for a motivation for one to keep such land. Understanding whether and in which sense land can be seen as being scarce is important under these different circumstances, as well as understanding who wants to lay a claim on land and for which purpose.

Data for this paper are drawn from fieldwork carried out between 2013 and 2015 in north-central Namibia, using a combination of methods from social anthropology, human geography and soil science, which allow for an interdisciplinary insight on scarcity. The social field in focus consists of landholders, land users, Traditional Authorities (TAs), land boards, and local and regional government officials. Apart from interviews and informal discussions with individual actors, our fieldwork included land use and soil fertility analysis, participant observation of village meetings, district meetings, meetings of TAs and Communal Land Boards. We refer to the interviews by using codes like: "CH_EFIDI_65M", with the first two letters indicating the name and surname of a person, the second group of letters indicating the location and the last numbers and letters indicating the rough age as well as the sex (Male or Female). For the calculation of the extent of allocated and registered land rights we had access to the parcel's register from the regional office of the Ministry of Agriculture, Water and Land Reform in Eenhana (renamed as 'the Ministry of Land Reform' in March 2015); and used QGIS Desktop 2.4.0 for analysis. We furthermore used visual analysis of aerial images. Our in-depth focus was on Ohangwena Region and more specifically the villages around Ondobe, but we are also drawing comparisons to other parts of Ohangwena Region (Figure 1, page 4).

2 Scarcity of land for agricultural purposes

As many households in north-central Namibia are involved agriculture, the scarcity of land for agricultural purposes will be analysed first. This is even though we will argue later that people do not only aspire to have land for agricultural production. After presenting how the pressure on agricultural land developed, we discuss the availability of high quality (in comparison with other land available in the North) agricultural land and the reasons for leaving land lying fallow in more detail.

2.1 Population pressure and land availability

One of the reasons for resource scarcity most frequently mentioned is population increase, which is an undisputed reality in north-central Namibia (Siiskonen, 1990; Erkkilä, 2001). While on average Namibia is sparsely settled, the density of people in north-central Namibia "is considerably greater than in other rural areas in south-western Africa" (Mendelsohn et al., 2013, p.125). Almost half of the Namibian population (around 43%) lives in north-central Namibia, of which 83% lives in rural areas (own calculation based on the aggregate data for Ohangwena, Omusati, Oshana and Oshikoto from NSA, 2012).

Early colonial estimates of population of north-central Namibia were between below 50,000 (Siiskonen, 1990) to 80,000 (in 1878) and 150 000 (in 1928) (Mendelsohn et al., 2000; Dobler, 2014). The population reached 850,000 people in 2011 (NSA, 2012). This is notwithstanding the declines in population growth rates, e.g. for Ohangwena Region, from 2.4% per year from 1991 to 2001 to 0.7% in the following decade (NSA, 2012). The current population density in Ohangwena is 23 persons per km^2 (NSA, 2012).

Population density within the regions however varies. Population concentrates around political and economic centres on the one hand (e.g. in towns like Oshikango, Eenhana and Okongo), and in specific rural areas with beneficial environmental parameters, on the other hand. In the Ohangwena region

there is a general west-east trend "from points of high to low concentration" (Mendelsohn, et al., 2000, pp.37–38; Dobler, 2014). The central Cuvelai floodplain was the location of Owambo kingdoms already in the pre-colonial period, while Kalahari woodlands to the east have only been settled recently as they were deemed unsuitable for human settlement, due to low soil fertility (Mendelsohn, et al., 2013), lack of infrastructures (e.g. for water) and cattle herding strategies.[1] Historical sources furthermore reflect how the eastern region has been strategically protected from permanent settlement in order to preserve the grazing area (Hayes 1997, p.60). However, the development of infrastructures (drilling of wells, roads) is currently changing these land use practices and people increasingly settle in the more eastern areas, and some points have even been proclaimed as local authority areas i.e. village council of Okongo. The eastward trend furthermore indicates that: a) either population pressure in the heartland has become so high that even the prohibitive environment of the eastern areas is settled nowadays or b) that the means and needs of using natural resources changed and therefore a formerly uninhabitable area now becomes attractive. This heterogeneous distribution of the population highlights how important scale and place are when discussing pressure on resources and an eventual scarcity of land. It also highlights how regional averages (e.g. of population density) fail to present the spatially heterogeneous picture of pressure on resources.

Apart from looking at population density, it is useful to consider how much land is still remaining and open for distribution. To evaluate the relationship between population pressure and land scarcity in more detail we looked at the change in field size per household as an indicator of potential scarcity of land. Using aerial images, Erkkilä (2001) suggested that the average size of cultivated land per household decreased from 4.5ha to 3.3ha between 1943 and 1996 in western Ohangwena region (from Ondobe to Eenhana). However, the number of people per household decreased as well (from 6.3 in 2001 to 5.6 in 2011 (NSA, 2012). Mendelsohn et al. (2000) therefore argue that cropland size in north-central Namibia on average remained constant per person between 1964 and 1999.

Whether cultivated areas will expand proportionally to the population growth in the future, partly depends on land still remaining for allocation. We calculated the proportion of allocated and not-allocated land in five areas of northern Namibia, all located in Ohangwena region (Figure 1) along a west-east gradient from high (Omhedi, Ondobe) to low population density (Eengonyo). To do so as a proxy, we estimated that the registered land corresponds to the allocated land. However, some homesteads visible on aerial images of 2003 were not registered. The sizes of these parcels were approximated to the average size of the registered parcels for each study area. The results indicate that the proportion of land remaining for allocation in the western areas of Omhedi and Ondobe is very low (11-14%), while it is comparatively high in Eengonyo (57%; Table 1). Homestead density is highest in Ondobe (14 homesteads per km2) and the lowest in Eengonyo (3.7), with inverse relation to parcel size (4.3 ha in Ondobe, 9.5 ha in Eengonyo). Among all areas, only headmen from villages in Eengonyo area are still welcoming new settlers. In the surroundings of Ondobe new land allocation is very rare nowadays and newcomers either take over an abandoned farm or benefit from sub-division of an existing parcel. This is testified by the village headmen who attested during the interviews that allocations for new landholdings are now scarce. Most of the allocations are either a result of subdivisions of landholdings or death. However, the perception of land scarcity and when land started being scarce is not homogenous. In Efidi, some land users claim that land has started to become scarce in the village since the 1960s (CH_EFIDI_65M), while almost 30% of the village surface was still not-allocated in 2014. This actually is a first hint that access to land can be sought for different reasons and that some pieces of land are considered of limited exploitation value and are therefore not included in considerations of available land, for example because of limited agronomic fertility or distance from the road (see section 2.2 for more details on different kinds of land).

[1] Kalahari woodlands were inhabited by San people.

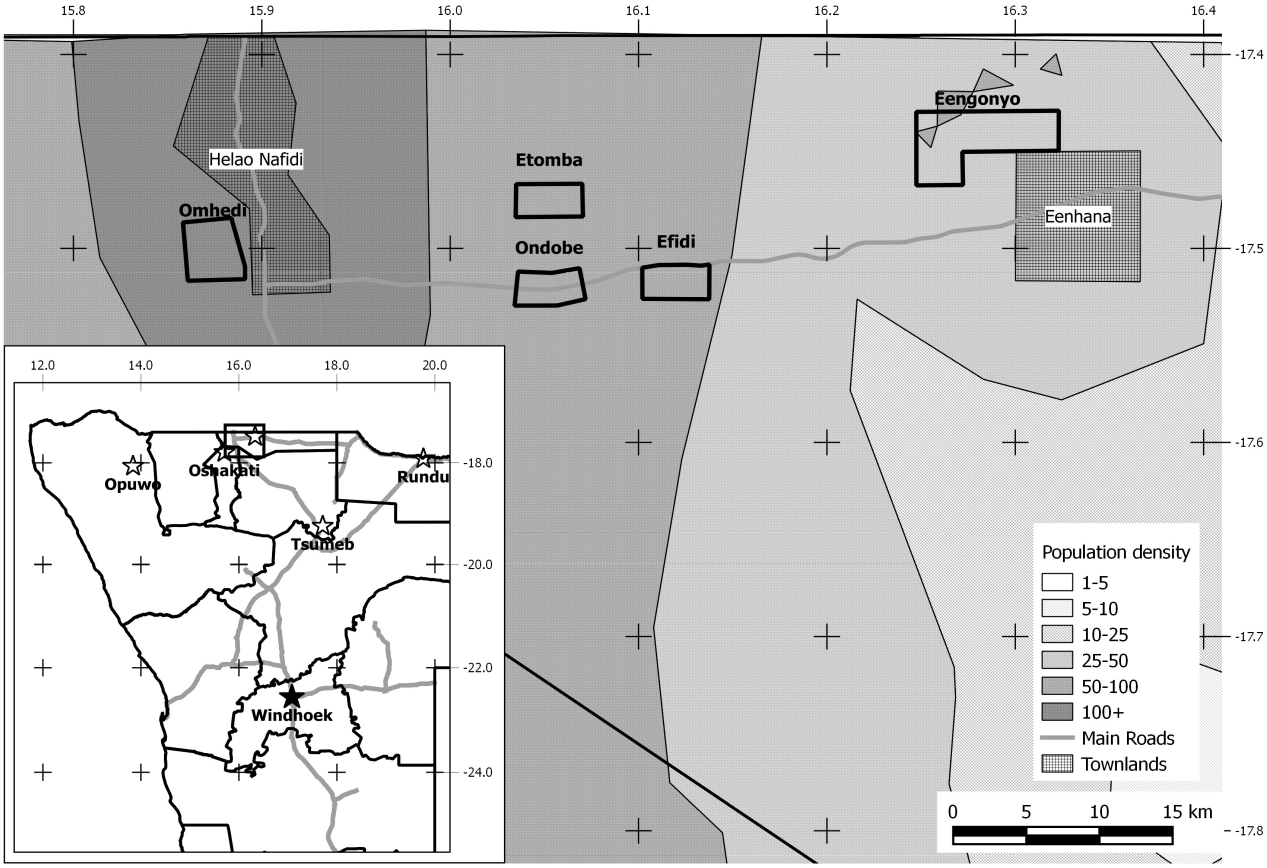

Figure 1: *Study areas used for calculation of the proportion of registered and cultivated land, are outlined in black (Omhedi, Etomba, Ondobe, Efidi, Eengonyo). They are all in Ohangwena region. Colours indicate population density (data from Atlas of Namibia Project, 2002).*

	Omhedi	**Ondobe**	**Etomba**	**Efidi**	**Eengonyo**
Area covered (ha)	1064	714	713	1040	2364
% Availability	11%	14%	18%	27%	57%
Density of homesteads (parc./km2)	13.3	14.0	11.4	7.2	3.7
Median plot size (ha)	4.9	4.3	5.3	8.0	9.5

Table 1*: Land availability, parcel density and plot size from five areas in Ohangwena region in 2014*

2.2 Availability of high-quality agricultural land

Apart from the size of the land, quality of land is important for farming practices. The dominant existing land types: *ekango/ediva*, *omutunda* and *omufitu* (as described by Verlinden and Dayot (2005)) have been identified in our study areas based on visual interpretation of aerial photographs from 2003*. Ekango/ ediva* are temporary ponds that are usually not cultivated. They were traditionally kept as communal land for grazing purposes. In the surroundings of Eenhana, some *omakango* (pl. of *ekango)* are cultivated and have been classified in our study as *omutunda*. *Omitunda* (pl. from *omutunda*) are the best soils for pearl millet cultivation (Verlinden & Dayot 2005). Some areas in *omitunda* delimited in our study are however not suitable for agriculture, for example when the soils are too salty, undergo waterlogging or are inundated. Finally, *omifitu* (pl. of *omufitu)* are areas that

were left forested for a long time, however can be found cultivated and settled nowadays, despite the low agronomic potential of the soil.

Almost all *omitunda* land in the five study areas has been allocated (Table 2), which is in accordance with its higher agricultural quality in comparison to others. The preference for *omutunda* is visible in Eenhana and, to a lesser extent, in Efidi and Etomba but not in Omhedi and Ondobe, the most densely populated areas. This is an indication that, in the most densely populated areas, agronomic quality is not the only criteria used to select a land parcel.

We estimated the extent of registered land that was actually cultivated, through visual identification of ploughed fields on aerial photographs (from 2003). The resulting figures (Table 2) represent an estimation of the average extent of cultivated land (in the five studied areas as indicated in Figure 1). The results indicates that the proportion of allocated land that is actually cultivated is constant from Omhedi to Etomba (around 40%) but slightly lower in Eengonyo and Efidi (around 30%). While o*mutunda* areas are more intensively used for planting than *omufitu*, in all areas, the proportion of *omutunda* cultivated remains low, especially in Etomba and Efidi (44% cultivated). *Omutunda* in Eengonyo is in comparison more intensively cultivated (75%). However, one has to acknowledge some classification inaccuracy given that areas identified as *omutunda* probably include various soils of limited agronomic potential.

	Omhedi	**Ondobe**	**Etomba**	**Efidi**	**Eengonyo**
% cultivated land out of the registered land	41	40	38	31	30
Average field size (ha)	2.0	1.7	2.0	2.3	2.3
% *omutunda* allocated	86%	85%	86%	90%	96%
% omufitu allocated	92%	82%	75%	74%	42%
% *omutunda* cultivated	56%	57%	44%	45%	75%
% omufitu cultivated	30%	24%	26%	24%	26%

***Table 2**: Percentage of registered cultivated land, 2014*

2.3 Could all land be used for crop cultivation and how is this determined by external factors?

As Table 2 shows, the proportion of regularly cultivated land is relatively small compared to the allocated areas. Yet people consistently claim that there is not enough land remaining. Could land be cultivated more intensively, and if so, what are the reasons that prevent cultivating the land?

Mendelsohn et al. (2000) state that one main reason preventing the cultivation of land is that it is not suitable for farming (other reasons could be insufficient rainfall or lack of resources, e.g. for ploughing or seeds in a given year). But human activities strongly influence soil fertility in north-central Namibia (Kreike 2013). For soils that are naturally very poor, cattle manure was and is still the main means to boost fertility: “Soil fertility remains good if there is enough manure” (VW_OILYA_45M). To provide the required manure, cattle were regularly brought from the cattle posts (*ofuka* - wilderness areas to the east) to the homestead areas (*oshilongo* - settled areas in the central and western areas) after the annual harvest. However, distances to the cattle posts have increased with the expansion of settlement areas to the east and these posts in many cases have now been transformed into permanent dwellings where cultivation takes place too (see section 2.1). At the same time, grazing land in the villages (*oshilongo*) decreased, due to enclosures and increased homestead density, so that livestock seldom is brought to the homesteads. Livestock and crop production are therefore increasingly separated, contributing to reduced manure availability and a decline in soil fertility in the western areas.

The value that people give to grazing areas in the villages which allow them to keep their animals close and have access to manure reflects an important part of their conception of land necessary for

successful farming. Hence, when grazing areas are not available in the close vicinity, land can be perceived to be scarce:

> *"There is not enough land anymore. The headman has sold all the land and the remaining parts are for the animals to graze." (LH_OMU_30F)*

In addition to livestock manure, traditional means to improve soil fertility were homestead and *kraal* (in Afrikaans language, an enclosure for cattle) relocation and clay spreading from ponds in the field. The latter mostly increases clay content of the soil, improving soils' long-term quality (Kreike, 2013), while relocation improves organic matter and nutrient status. Most of these techniques are labour intensive and are no longer practiced. This is where the socio-economic situation in the region comes into play: migration to towns is substantially reducing the active labour force in agriculture to an extent that it is currently creating problems during peaks of labour needs (see also e.g. Newsham & Thomas, 2009). The resulting decrease in labour force on the farm, decreases possibilities to use labour intensive soil management practices that aim at increasing land productivity in a sustainable manner. Lack of people to work in the field (e.g. for weeding) has also been mentioned as reason for production loss (ibid.). Low and erratic rainfall further decreases the yields on fields and thereby can, by increasing the amount of land needed to harvest a given number of crops, also lead to a perceived shortage of land. From this perspective, the issue is not land availability, but rather insufficient harvests. In this context, scarcity of land is directly linked to technologies and possibilities of improving yields. Under normal conditions the estimated yield of pearl millet (*Pennisetum glaucum*) is 200 kg per hectare (Mendelsohn 2006, p.38), which on the average only provides half of the annually needed amount of pearl millet per household (estimation based on a household size of 6 people on 2ha, with an annual need of 160kg per person). In theory and given sufficient means and available labour force, increasing the average field productivity is however said to be possible with some techniques that proved promising in the area (e.g. Von Hase, 2013). We did not study the options to increase yields in detail and therefore do not know what the costs of implementing them would be. However, we want to use those examples to argue that studies should clearly differentiate between shortage of land, shortage of land for cultivation, insufficient yields, and shortage of production means.

Whether land is perceived to be scarce depends on the qualitative and quantitative needs for specific kinds of land: a land parcel might in principle be big enough for cultivation, but too small to keep the necessary livestock whose manure makes its cultivation sustainable. From a cattle holders' perspective, land in a settled area is scarce. This explains that even areas like those around Eenhana, where population density is relatively low, are already considered as crowded: "*Now the village is full, the only land still available is omufitu [in this context: sandy soils with limited agronomic potential]*" (EA_E_65M).

3 Non-agricultural meanings of land and manifestations of scarcity

The settlement and allocation patterns, as well as our observations in the field, indicate that land use and material and immaterial meanings connected to land are in a state of transition. While agricultural production remains important for providing minimum subsistence base (Thiem 2014, p. 55-56) and to sustain customary livelihood patterns, there is a decline in agriculture's contribution to the household economy in Ohangwena; from 52% to household incomes in 2001, to only 26% in 2011 (NSA 2012). By 2016, merely 22.7% of the Ohangwena households relied on subsistence farming as a main source of income (Namibia Statistics Agency, 2016, p.76). Other main sources of income were pensions 20.6%, wages and salaries 21.6%, business 10.3% and remittances or grants 18.6% (ibid.). Often single households depend on several of those income sources:

> "*One person may have a paid job, another obtains a pension, and yet another is given a remittance by a relative working, elsewhere. Others in the family are engaged in farming activities to produce consumable goods […]." (Mendelsohn 2000: 64)*

This is among others a legacy of colonial and apartheid times, when it was a deliberate strategy to force people into labour migration (e.g. Wolpe,1995, p. 72). When asked whether there is a shortage of land for cultivation, a village headman replied:

> *"Yes, it is true, the land to cultivate gets small compared to the olden days; the cultivating areas were big because they [people in general] did not have jobs so they may feed their families. But now in this lifetime people do work, so even if they are left with a little area to cultivate, they will surely have a source of income from the children or from whatever little that they are selling." (AA_VHM_70M)*

Even though the sources of livelihoods are now diversified, and agriculture is no longer the only source, the significance of land endures, in fact the need for access to land persists.

Ferguson remarks that in southern Africa "the importance of land, and the desire for it, seems in some ways to loom as large as ever" (2013, p.167), for what are labelled to be social or cultural reasons, with land being a source of "power, wealth, and meaning" (Shipton & Goheen 1992, p.307). In the following (sub)sections, we will expatiate on these diversified interests and land uses, on the social meaning of access to land, and what interests make people and specifically Traditional Authorities claim its scarcity. Thereby it will also be discussed how control over land, and its discursive scarcity or abundance, serve in negotiations of power which reach beyond land.

3.1 Land as space for settlement and its influence on the value of land

Types of land uses that are visibly increasing across the research area are for residential purposes and businesses (such as *cuca-shops* and businesses). These are often starting points for areas that will be proclaimed as town land later. While the infrastructure in rural areas is invested in, and commercial clusters develop around informal businesses, the demand for renting accommodation is rising.[2]

> *"I decided to come to Okahenge*[3] *because I wanted to make a living and earn some money for my family. I have just been asking around Okahenge whether there is a place where I can start my business and someone told me of this place, which was up for renting." (HK_OMU_40F)*

Those land claims are not depending on agronomic soil quality but built on the need for space in a certain thriving locality. The priority often lies in the vicinity of transport opportunities, as mobility prices are comparatively high in the region, and can therefore influence the choice of settlement location substantially. For example, people not only settled in the proximity of Ondobe due to its spiritual value (Ondobe has the oldest church in north-central Namibia), but were also attracted by the infrastructural benefits that exist close to Ondobe; such as the road and trading posts (Dobler, 2014, p. 8-10). This led to the development of Okahenge, the adjacent peri-urban area, where roads, trade, and information networks meet, into a commercial centre. The following change in the location's value does, however, create conflicts between households of different socio-economic standings, since the absence of a spatial planning scheme creates a direct competition between new, commodified and privatised uses of land, and the existing agricultural and communal land claims.

The woman cited above is renting space for her business and also as a residence for her family during the week, as the settlement lies closer to the daughter's school and she can save daily transport costs. Her rent is paid to a communal farmer, who established the space and buildings on an uncultivated part of his plot. In order to structure this process, some TAs have even earmarked parts of their villages for commercial purposes, where people get rights of leaseholds instead of customary land rights. This shows the transformation of the value of land, from a rural agriculturalist value towards an informal economic and settlement value and using it as geographical capital to provide proximity to public services and job opportunities. The communal land policies and laws so far have not sufficiently taken those changes and emerging settlement dynamics around land uses into consideration in order to allow for a diversified spatial planning. Although the law provides for the registration of leaseholds,

[2] This however is most of the time happening in unregulated and informal ways, as officially communal land is not to be sold (MLR November/December, 2011, p. 1).
[3] *Okahenge* = an informal settlement close to Ondobe.

which would do justice to differentiated land uses, its process of implementation is still slow and inconsistent across the region.

3.2 Land as social security and safety net

Land that is seemingly "unused" often serves a special purpose as well. Communal areas in their diverse forms of usage serve as a vital social safety net, which comes in effect as a shelter and subsistence in case of unemployment and for care-giving family members. Consequently, people who derive their present livelihood from waged employment still strive to own land in the communal areas, either for their retirement or to ensure land access to their offspring. By securing farming and living space, they ensure their livelihood basis for when becoming economically inactive members of society, which not only offers an economic safety but also a dignified alternative, as one land holder explains:

> *"To have land in the village is very important. I can lose my job in town and I will probably not be able to pay my house loan and the house might be repossessed, but my land in the village will sustain me. It will take away that shame." (KH_OND_33M)*

This strategic security network through land is wide-spread and results in numerous absentee landholders, who claim communal land areas as a reserve.

The labour migration system came into place in early colonial times and established a migratory movement providing options for cash income. The history of north-central Namibia also explains why the search for employment is not seen as a shift away from the land and its livelihood, but as a temporary economic strategy for the wealth and development of the area. Even among village headmen it is common to be employed or engage in entrepreneurship far from their villages. Yet, although some of their subjects were regretful of their absence, in remote or far away towns all year round, villagers did not complain about, but underlined the importance of creating an income in town, so that they "can contribute to society" (VP_OND_55F). Land claims can be expanded into the future, in the form of land reservations and land banking, for retirement when people are going to rely on land for their substantial needs and for their children when they grow up. This socio-spatial organisation is deeply ingrained in Namibia's political economy that this land claim is completely acknowledged, and even considered necessary in order to ensure a livelihood after employment.

This set-up also has wider economic consequences: the majority of the population in the north-central regions consists of pensioners who often share a household with children below or at school age, as most of the youth have migrated to urban areas in search for better living conditions. For those households, the most important source of income consists of grants such as old-age pension or orphans and vulnerable children support (NSA, 2012). As the lifestyle in the village requires fewer financial inputs compared to urban areas, it is legitimate to say that farming and/or land, and the government social protection programmes are complementing each other in terms of social welfare or as social safety nets most particularly for the rural poor.

Another type of claim related to the land reservation by absentee landholders is the need to ensure access to land for the family descendants or future development. While those involved in such land banking practices are presently not deriving livelihoods from those land parcels. Often, other people, for example extended family members, live there in order to demonstrate presence and to prevent land from becoming what is locally known as *eputu (deserted land)* and thus risk re-allocation to other people[4]. In return, they are allowed to directly derive their livelihoods from the land through cultivation. As one of the participants explained:

> *"I got three land parcels, the main one and two more that are in the east. I got these in 1989 already; knowing that after independence there will be competition for land. I acquired these two land parcels for my children when they grow up." (DKM_ONAM_92M)*

[4] There is a rule in customary law that if one does not cultivate one's land for three consecutive years, the land right will be alienated. However, very few cases of eviction on these grounds have yet been witnessed, and none was observed in the course of this study.

The uncertainty about future economic position, and cultural values related to land use makes land banking an important practice, while the process of registration of land parcels cannot cater for such social complex and dynamic land tenure relations.

3.3 Belonging and community membership

The practice of reserving land in communal areas is legitimised on the one hand by its inalienability as a social security, as has been argued above, due to high rates of unemployment and precarious job opportunities. On the other hand, it is legitimised by the identity-driven claim towards a space within one's rural community of origin. Land is generally seen as important to give a place to a sense of community and identity, but in Africa maybe even more so because of the emotionally loaded history of conquest, dispossession and forced relocations (Lund, 2013; Appadurai, 1995). The quest to reserve land within the village for one's children to have a place – in the physical and social sense, even if it is just for residence – in the community they were born into, drives many elderly people to subdivide their plots. This act depicts a prioritization of village residency and vicinity to family members over high-quality agricultural land; thus, rendering the land's meaning as a means of social belonging more apparent. While this is not a new trend, it has increased over the years in the wake of scarcity of land (in material/physical terms).

> *"My children are grown up now, but there is no land in this village for them to build their houses. […] Even land for residence is not there. That is why I have given them parts of my land parcel. Even if there was land in ofuka [here: uncleared bush/forest, wilderness] I wanted my children to have their houses in the village. That is where they were born." (JD _OND _80M)*

Another example of land use for social recognition of community membership is explained by a village headman. His accounts reflect on the cultivation of *omakango*[5] for reasons other than direct food security. He cultivates his own field in the village to "keep the traditions" of putting land to use even though he invests much more in the cultivation process than the harvesting output is worth in economic terms.

> *"Last year, I spent almost 8000 [NAD] for ploughing, then seed, then remove that grass then…. Then, at the end of the day we only get something like 10, or 11 buckets of Omakango […]. Now… what you put in is what you're not getting out! So you're only doing it to keep the traditional way of life. But you're not doing it for any benefit!" (SK_OND_45M)*

This displays how various members of a household can benefit differently from a certain land use: While the quoted headman is absent from the village but invests financially, his extended family members live on the farm permanently, invest physical labour, and derive a share of their livelihood from the harvest. Such processes of distribution of benefits from land underpin land relations "across social relations of kinship, clientelage, allegiance and solidarity" (see more on this in Ferguson 2013:169). It furthermore shows that land right holders might not always be the users of the land.

According to several informants, cultivating even unproductive fields is important to avoid giving an impression of laziness to the neighbours. In those cases, the purpose for cultivating land is keeping a legitimate place within the community. A further rather cultural activity that also requires land is keeping cattle. Cattle are of high cultural importance in our study region and are seen as an important token of male adulthood. Apart from serving as a source of food and workforce (until today, many fields are ploughed by oxen), they are important for keeping up social status and relations and as payment means for land, customary fines or celebrations. Therefore, land is not only important for agricultural output, but also for its socio-cultural meanings. Consequently, explaining scarcity of land and its consequences exclusively in agricultural terms, would ignore a whole spectrum of aspects of negotiations and competition around the resource.

3.4 Power and discourses around control over land and control over people

As we have seen, there are different perspectives and dimensions of understanding scarcity of land, for present or future generations, or for agricultural or settlement purposes. These understandings can be

[5]Ten buckets equal 200 kg of pearl millet. This quantity would translate into an equivalent of 800 NAD if sold, but in this area, harvests are rarely offered for sale.

contrasting or even conflicting. An important question is therefore who gets access to land and how land is related to power struggles. In this section, our focus will be on the allocation of land to households by Traditional Authorities, although of course the additional power relations that unfold within each household regarding access to land and control over it, are similarly important aspects of consideration (Mendelsohn et al., 2000).

By virtue of their position, the Communal Land Reform Act vests communal land administration in the hands of Traditional Authorities (TAs), in particular of their "Chief" (Republic of Namibia, 2002, Sect. 20.a), which, in the case of the Okwanyama and the Ondonga traditional authorities, corresponds with the position of the King or Queen. The Act further states that this power may be devolved to lower-level TAs (ibid. Sect. 20.b) and within the study area this was commonly allocated to the village headmen. However, during discussions and interviews with villagers and TA members in the study area, this function and power has become increasingly constrained by rising demand for land, for commodified and state-controlled areas, and consequently by intensified diversity of (conflicting) interests between state and traditional authorities. For instance, the Communal Land Boards have seriously impacted the sovereignty of village headmen in land management.

Apart from depending on legitimation from the state governance system, traditional instruments for ensuring fair and equitable land distribution build on a strong relation between the community and the respective TAs. However, this relation is threatened by a growing local elite that builds its power on neoliberal rather than "traditional" sources of legitimacy. This elite, disposing over mobility, economic capital, and legal knowledge, can react more readily to changing land planning strategies by the government, such as the declaration of town lands or commercial farming plots. In such a case they can decide to either cooperate with or to ignore community consensus on land claims. In recent years, the national media has also increasingly reported on illegal land sales by village headmen to rich community outsiders, offering insight into the economic disparities and the room for manoeuvre that economic capital provides in communal areas. One village headman admitted that his power was limited when faced with new settlers who extended their landholdings according to their own discretion. He added that such self-extensions at times occur with permission of senior headmen, who are suspected to gain from the exchange. Statements of this kind substantiate that land is a stage for competing powers between TAs and the state, and among different hierarchies of TA.

Apart from being an important part of their power basis (as explained in Sikor & Lund,2009), land available for distribution constitutes a source of income through *ombadu yekaya,* a form of tribute paid in return for receiving a landholding, which for some TA members are an essential revenue. And with the power of allocating land, this income is currently threatened by the expansion of urban areas and declaration of town centres within their jurisdictions, which is often the consequence of the spread of commercial centres such as Okahenge that was described earlier (section 3.1).

The proportion of the urban population in Ohangwena versus the rural increased from 1% in 2001 to 6% in 2016, related to the proclamations of some urban areas as well as urban migration (NSA, 2012). Helao Nafidi, Eenhana and Okongo are the fast-expanding urban areas in Ohangwena region. The central government has the authority to proclaim localities as local authorities, official settlements or towns. In this process, the government establishes commercial and administrative 'enclaves', within which land is commodified. This means that land is owned as freehold and turned into a disposable or insurable good, and subjected to statutory planning and management. After an area has been proclaimed an urban area, its governance is diverted from the respective TAs and given to the newly established statutory local authority. As a result, TAs do not only lose power over land, but potentially also over people as the two factors are interlinked through the concept of jurisdiction. In the statement below, a village headman reflects on this:

> *"The problem we have is that land is very scarce. Things are not getting any better especially as towns are growing and they are taking up a large part of communal land. […] They are not only taking up our land, but also our people. Because once communal land goes in the town boundaries, we, the TAs, have no control over that land and the people anymore." (AA_VHM_70M)*

While the discourse of the headman is based on the scarcity of land, the quote is putting equal importance on the loss of power that results from it. Land and its scarcity are often employed as a more tangible and neutral object in the discourse on power.

TAs do not solely rely on land allocation as a source of power. Especially in remote areas, the TAs are still the most accessible institution for local communities to manage disputes, and they serve as an information channel between the government and their subjects. In fact, in cases where the TAs no longer dispose of land for allocation, some even have actively pushed and lobbied for parts of their jurisdiction to be declared as town land. Speaking to the same village headman as cited above at another occasion, he expressed his expectation of relief and support in conflict management once a local authority is appointed to the commercial centre.

Claims of scarcity of land by the TAs should therefore always be seen in relation to their struggle for power and their evaluation of which skills and capacities can ensure their leadership. The son of a headman whose village has largely been incorporated into Eenhana town explains how the village headmen in the area sustain each other's power over their subjects, by depicting scarcity as more or less acute according to the headman's purpose:

> *"[For example, if] I'm going now to Etomba … looking for a place. They will say: "Ha! There is nothing!" But if you have a good reference letter [from] here, [stating] that you are known here from Eenhana – and the headmen, they know each other – they say "oh! You're from […] village. And they see this letter… if there's a place they can say: 'Yes, ok, you can have a small one!'." (LN_ENH_30M)*

When asked whether she still has the power to allocate available land, a headwoman from a village identified as 'less densely populated' (Mendelsohn et al. (2000) [6] replied:

> *"There is no more available land, the land is finished up". (ML_OSH_60W)*

Against the background of what we have established in terms of the discursive strategies inherent in the scarcity discourse, this statement may be interpreted differently: Either there really is no unallocated land remaining, or the agricultural quality of the remaining land is too low in the eyes of the headwoman, or she is unwilling or hesitant to give a piece of land without negotiating the intended use and the applicant's personality. In the latter scenario, her role in a negotiation is stronger if she starts with a scarcity statement, so that she may refuse allocation to an applicant who does not appear to be a desirable community member. In this context it also needs to be noted that it is uncommon to evict a person from a place once he or she has established a homestead or any other improvements on the field.

The scarcer the resource is, according to the prevalent understanding and discourse, the more the way it is managed gains importance. As one deputy headman (MN_OSHA_55M) states, if the TA is too "weak" to manage its land according to scarcity perceptions of the community and feels invaded, the TAs' control, internal support, and ultimately legitimacy decreases. A perceived fairness in land administration thereby is an important factor for the legitimacy of the village leader's authority, and it also relieves the perceived scarcity of land by the village members. Against this background, some village headmen refrain from further allocations in order to enclose their social and physical jurisdiction, while others allocate to external applicants for personal financial gain or out of lack of power to prohibit land trading among villagers. As long as the TAs manage the land with reference to their community's needs and fears, their landed power basis stays intact.

4 Conclusion

Our empirical material displays a diversified picture of meanings of land, which are nowadays also reflected in state activities. Not only is the state designating areas for commercialization of land-based production; there are also different types of land rights granted in communal areas. Apart from customary land rights, rights of agricultural and non-agricultural leaseholds purposes can be obtained.

[6] Around two people/km^2 (Mendelsohn et al. 2000).

Spaces for settlement and business have become as important as agricultural land to many rural Namibians. While agricultural land remains important for many, the social meaning of land as a sign of belonging and identification to a certain group and class is as important as it was before, even if the type of belonging shifted.

Even in the domain of small-scale agriculture, population density and plot size do not give an adequate picture of scarcity as many more aspects than the size of cultivated land impact on the harvest that can be achieved. Scarcity of land must be seen in relation to material, social and symbolic needs and differentiated according to the scale and place of observation.[7] Whether land is perceived to be scarce depends on the qualitative and quantitative needs for specific kinds of land.

Land is embedded in processes of social change like urbanisation, social promotion or relegation and shifts in the power relationships. Land and land reform are the means and the results of these social changes, and land must be understood from all perspectives, not only as the material basis of livelihoods. Understanding the multiple meanings of land for local livelihoods and identities is essential in order to grasp what people speak of when they refer to land as being scarce, and to develop an accurate picture of pressing land issues that can inform policy measures. Neither numeric explanations (population density or soil quality standards) nor discursive analysis alone can satisfactorily explain the meaning of "scarcity of land" in a general perspective.

Different aspects of scarcity have found their entry into local discourse, such as (a) scarcity of good quality agronomic land and the possibilities of managing it sustainably; (b) scarcity of communal land and its relation to scarcity of settlement space with the example of town lands; (c) fear of scarcity of land in the future as leading to land banking and fencing off "unused" land, as well as (d) scarcity as a political and corruption argument and power tool (employed by TA's but also by the community elite).

Consequently, we argue for a more nuanced concept of scarcity of land, in order to do justice to the broad range of human ambitions towards land. We suggest transferring the meaning of 'scarcity' as an explicit form of existence of a certain resource towards a relational characteristic that supports and legitimises a certain value and use of a resource in discursive negotiations.

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[7] A quote from Pastor Vilho Kaulinge (Hayes & Haipinge, 1997) reflects that discourse on scarce or "limited" land already existed very long time ago (when other sources still described land as abundant and unsettled): "The time [king Nakale] was in 'Ovamboland', people were living close together and there were not enough fields for ploughing and cattle grazing. The Ovakwanyama, Aakwambi and Aanndonga were all sharing the limited land available for cultivation."

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