

What Are The Govt's Priorities On Land?

THE debate concerning Namibian's land hunger goes on and will continue to do so as long as politicians have the remotest chance of gaining support from this. The debate takes place on a platform of highly charged emotions leading to threats of forced farmland occupations, which in turn causes concern about a Zimbabwe-style situation arising. The fact that we have elected union members as well as elected members of Parliament stating quite openly that they will ignore the Constitution and the rule of law by taking the law into their own hands seems not to have even caused a stir here. Quite amazing that a country which tells the world how proud it is of its Constitution for which so many lives were lost and which it will defend by all means can become so selective in its criticism or rather lack thereof.

The fact that Swapo finally ordered the unions to discontinue their folly is of little consolation when the people of Namibia are prepared to accept such lawlessness and irresponsible behaviour without a murmur. The only voices of concern we hear time and time again are those of *The Namibian* newspaper and the NSHR.

Here are some thoughts concerning this issue.

A person who squats or one who does not own land but who chooses for whatever reason to live off that land has no responsibility towards that land. Once however he owns land, this situation changes drastically. All of a sudden the availability of water for him, his family and animals becomes his responsibility, the availability or

not of grazing takes on different dimensions, no longer can he trek with his animals to some other place in order to be able to graze his animals by surreptitious means. Fencing, inoculation of animals, relations with neighbours, the effect of drought, if there exists a decent house on the farm, its upkeep as well as that of established gardens or orchards; all become the responsibility of this person, a responsibility which he has never before had and which no one has taught him to manage, let alone given him the means to pay for.

Aspiring farmers will also have to pay salaries and wages; eventually taxes and repay the loan plus interest.

The situation is made even worse when all the support systems are not in place and the chances of success are from the very beginning remote because the area of land given is too small ever to be viable. Can you imagine this person's discontent when he finds out after three or five years that he was not adequately prepared for this venture and that the land has as a result of various factors such as overgrazing and drought become useless, necessitating more and or another piece of land.

Even though studies have shown that the most pressing needs in Namibia are poverty and the lack of employment, the Government chooses to prioritise the issue of land. This sensitive issue of land gives our political leaders a useful and emotional platform from which they try to gain support for their own political ambitions. It would be far more difficult to obtain that support if there was no or less

poverty and employment was of little concern.

We constantly hear talk about expropriation and resettlement at the expense of more innovative ways of trying to address this very real problem. A foreign farmer's land, which has been targeted for expropriation, will in most cases already be developed and the owner will have at his disposal some if not lots of money.

So, instead of going to the trouble such as litigation, having to meet the requirements of the Foreign Investment Act, or risking the value of farmland being drastically reduced by going to the tribunal in the event that an agreement cannot be reached on the price for the farm, why not approach Mr Foreigner and suggest to him a partnership with a Namibian?

Instead of going to all the trouble set out above and exposing our countrymen to the challenges of establishing what already exists albeit in another's name, and paying for what is already there in the form of not only land but water, fences, vehicles, pumps, generators etc, the partnership can be structured in various innovative ways and would not cost Government a fraction of what it would cost to litigate, buy the farm and develop it.

My experience has been that foreigners most want space, freedom, clean air and the possibility to hunt. All of this we could continue to make available and at the same time accommodate a serious Namibian farmer and quench his thirst for land. Another advantage is that the

foreigner spends little time on the farm. A really daring but innovative way of obtaining land is to invite foreigners to buy farmland on the condition that they enter into partnerships with Namibians on set terms. Many a Namibian farmer too would only be too happy to receive an interest free loan in order to restock his or her farm in exchange for agreeing to a partnership with a Namibian.

A priority now is to find a way of using the best skills available to move the unemployed and even the unemployable into the formal economy in order to address the real problems - unemployment and poverty. To provide aspirant farmers and communities with access to land and essential services fails to address the real problem if they cannot afford these services on a sustainable basis.

Rather than continue with their attempt to gain political support by misguiding the unemployed, both the unions and the Government must realise that the immediate goal must be to give Namibians back their dignity, which is something they fought and suffered for, by giving them access to employment and to relieve poverty. We should follow the example of South Africa where vast sums have recently been budgeted specifically for job creation measures, rather than spending huge amounts on the personal aspirations of some politicians. What really are Government's priorities?

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