

Land Policies in Communal Farmlands

*in the dry
subhumid southeast*

Key points

- The historical context of policies has a significant impact on present day livelihoods
- Understanding people's responses to changes is essential if the full impact of policies on rural livelihoods and their sustainability is to be achieved
- Dryland people are resourceful and can adapt flexibly to policies to secure livelihoods



Research areas:

- 1 Arid southwest:
 - a) Mier, South Africa
 - b) SW Kgalagadi, Botswana
2. Semiarid northwest:
 - a) Ghanzi Dist, Botswana
 - b) Omaheke, Namibia
3. Dry sub-humid southeast:
 - a) NW Province South Africa
 - b) Barolongs, Botswana

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This briefing compares the impact of different land policies on communal mixed farming systems in the dry subhumid region of Botswana and the adjacent area of South Africa. Major policy changes in the region have led to shifts and changes in agricultural practices with long term impacts on livelihood security and sustainability. The historical context is essential to understanding these present day livelihood changes.

History of land use change

Shared histories: This cross-border area has had a varied history of colonial, apartheid and independent rule. The shifting international boundary over the last 150 years, has dominated the politics of nationality, ethnicity and family. It has at times split villages, prevented families from attending funerals, stopped migrants from returning to work and curtailed the import and export of goods across the border. However, since independence in Botswana and the end of apartheid in South Africa new policies of land reform and agricultural development have emerged as both countries have restructured and re-oriented their political frameworks.

In 1884 the area north of the Molopo River was partitioned off to become part of the Bechuanaland Protectorate, and the area south of the river became part of the Crown Colony of British Bechuanaland (later to be incorporated into the Union of South Africa). The Rolong chiefdom was physically divided because of the need to have a feature, i.e. a river, demarcating the border and no thought was given to the immediate and long-term consequences of this divide for the Rolong people. The two areas either side of the border then followed radically different pathways.

Bophuthatswana was created as a 'homeland' in 1959 as part of the apartheid strategy and was later granted 'independence' in 1977. One of the ways in which Bophuthatswana tried to proclaim its independence was to promote agricultural policies which would lead to self-sufficiency in food production. Through 'betterment' programmes, agriculture in the communal areas was mechanised and traditional patterns of land use and resource allocation transformed. However the links between the white commercial farming sector and the 'homeland', through the labour market and agri-businesses, remained critical, propping up these dual economies. These links have remained key to the integrated agriculture economy today.

The **Barolong Farms** in south east Botswana were at one time regarded as the 'granary of Botswana'. This reputation evolved at a time when Botswana was concerned with food self-sufficiency. Botswana was opposed to South Africa's apartheid regime, yet it was dependent to a large extent on food and other imports from its neighbour. Relations were strained further when Botswana refused to recognise Bophuthatswana as an independent nation and Mangope (Bophuthatswana's President) effectively closed the border with Botswana. This happened at a time of severe drought in Botswana (early 1980s) and awareness of the need for national food self-sufficiency was heightened. Therefore, arable farmers, and those in the Barolongs in particular, received favourable input and output prices and mechanised farming was encouraged through favourable rates of interest on loans. Arable agriculture operated at both commercial and traditional levels side by side, with policies and programmes tailored for both. However, this led to further polarisation between large and small scale farmers and overall began a trend of lowering total production output.

How do people respond?

Rural farmers in **NW Province** are now facing the challenge of a transformed government which has inclusive and empowering policies. These are attempting to incorporate even the smallest farmers into the national agricultural economy. However, many of the elements of these policies, which have the potential to improve livelihoods and empower small-scale black farmers, are proving not to translate effectively into practice on the ground. *This leaves rural livelihoods, and rural farming livelihoods in particular, in a vulnerable situation.* At the centre of these transformed policies is the government's **Land Reform Programme** which has powers to return land to the dispossessed, redistribute land and enable others to purchase land through grant and award systems. This process is changing the landscape of the rural area, albeit slowly, and is probably the key policy to have affected rural livelihoods over the last decade (BN10D). In all other respects rural development policy in South Africa lack co-ordination and efficacy, and this means small-scale farmers are having to diversify away from farming in order to support their families and prop up their farming livelihoods.

In **the Barolongs**, within the last decade there has been a significant decline in the amount of land under cultivation and overall yields for the area have dropped significantly. There are several

reasons that may account for this decline. Botswana has shifted from a policy based on food self-sufficiency to one of food security. Botswana now freely imports much of its grain from South Africa and as a consequence gives less support in subsidies and overall encouragement to its own farmers in dryland areas. These farmers cannot compete with the South African market and thus less land is being cultivated under traditional crops (white maize and sorghum) and farmers are starting to diversify away from cereal production.

Small-scale farmers in the Barolongs faced further problems when the **National Development Bank** (NDB) recalled agricultural loans taken out in the 1980s to buy farm machinery. These loans had mainly been used to mechanise small-scale production in Botswana at a time when Barolong agriculture was being strongly promoted. However, with the change in economic climate in the mid 1990s, NDB recalled their loans in 1995 and where necessary confiscated tractors and other farm machinery from farmers defaulting on their loans. Payments on many loans had ceased following drought in 1992 and 1994. Most farmers had not kept up their donkey or oxen plough teams and thus most farmers were unable to plough after the confiscation of their tractors. *This had severe effects upon their agricultural livelihoods and has possibly led to greater reliance on state support systems and remittance payments from nearby towns and cities.* The change in focus of the Agriculture Policy, combined for many with the loss of farm machinery, considerably increased vulnerability to shocks and stresses, especially to drought, which is endemic to the region, and both major and minor drought incidences have had severe impacts upon small-scale farming livelihoods.

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