

# Managing the Risk of Drought in Southern African Drylands

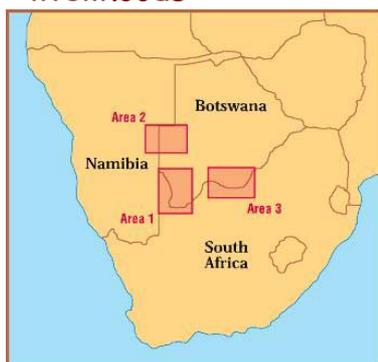
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## PANRUSA Briefing Notes

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### Key points

- Drought is endemic and should be considered a norm rather than an unexpected event
- Understanding people's responses to risk 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 policy and environmental changes 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

Managing risk, in whatever form (social, environmental, economic, political) requires flexibility and the capability to cope with variability and uncertainty. This briefing explores the key facilitating and inhibiting factors governing livelihoods in the arid south west region and the flexible adaptations people make to cope with environmental and policy change. The main risk identified for this region is drought.

### Environmental change - coping with drought

In the arid southwest, drought is endemic and is the key event structuring people's lives. Movements of people and animals at different times form one of the strategies used to mitigate the effects of drought. Movement of livestock is still according to resource availability during drought and dry times, but is also linked to social networks and knowledge of the resource base, as well as land and water rights.

The **Farmers' Association (FA)** in Botswana (1b) was formed in the 1960s in response to the severe drought. The government allocated Tsane-Tsane and Drieboom as emergency relief boreholes to be managed by the FA, a group formed by the farmers from Bokspits and surrounding farms and settlements. Membership of the FA was principally through one member of the household, though as people have died, memberships have not always been passed on because of uncertainties over who should be awarded the role within households. However, it was unclear what tangible benefits membership of the FA gave households. It should give access to the boreholes during drought times, but in practice any member of the community can use the boreholes so long as they contribute money for the diesel for pumping water. One farmer in the area said the FA was very weak and could be used as a pressure group to lobby the government for more support for farmers in their region. Instead he considered that it operated weakly with little focus. The FA boreholes are now also used by some farmers as a temporary grazing resource while they wait for their own boreholes to be drilled. Those who live on communal land, as well as those with farms, all used the FA boreholes.

The main recent major drought event to have affected people in the region was in 1984-5. This drought was the catalyst which caused many people's livelihoods to suffer. During this time farmers were unable to sell livestock as prices plummeted across southern Africa and all households sustained serious livestock losses. Even the emergency grazing areas of Tsane-Tsane were unable to sustain the increased pressure on the resources. Since then droughts have occurred but losses have in general been lower.

Some farmers have been able to utilise the FA boreholes successfully, while others have been able to purchase additional feed. Others, with fewer livestock, have been able to collect fodder from Shepherd trees (*Boscia albitrunca*) and pods from acacias. In many cases movements between boreholes and settlements provided the main strategy for coping with drought. Given the increases in livestock numbers due to the FAP (BN10B) and the uncertainty over the environmental sustainability of this expansion, it has to be questioned what impact another major drought would have in the region.

The people of Mier (area 1a) have varied agricultural livelihoods, including livestock keeping and small scale horticulture, and a range of non-agricultural activities. However the threat of drought remains an important event structuring people's lives in this arid region. For example, in Loubos attempts to irrigate land commercially for watermelons, pumpkins and wheat failed. Several reasons were cited: tension surrounding land allocations within the scheme, tensions between livestock owners and crop farmers, and importantly, the failure of rains in 1998-9 and the drastically reduced water supply to the dam.

### **Policy change - coping with intervention**

In some settlements in areas 1b (and 2a), drought relief labouring and piece work are the main employment opportunities to be found locally. Reliance of drought relief labouring, like in many areas of the country, is significant for the poorer households. Since drought relief was suspended in June 2000, many households reported that there were no waged work opportunities for them to follow. For those who had received 'Ration B' food allocation, which was part of the drought relief package, and which had now ceased, this had a significant negative impact on livelihoods. Some households were able to re-register as destitutes and therefore start receiving the Ration A food allocation which was not dependant on drought conditions being declared. Given that people do transfer from the Ration B to the Ration A list suggests that people

are dependant on the programme irrespective of drought conditions. Welfare payments (cash and food) remain central to the livelihoods of many households in the region (see BN11).

Within Mier in South Africa there are no explicit drought payments made to farming or non-farming households. However the reliance on welfare payments is great and could be seen as essential in supporting households made vulnerable, either directly or indirectly, through drought conditions. Fifty percent of households in the Mier survey received some form of government allowance, and of these forty-three percent considered it as their main source of income.

### **Outcomes**

- **Drought relief boreholes in Botswana provide valuable water and grazing resources for all stock owners during drought. However conditions of use are continually being re-negotiated**
- **Drought relief labouring, especially in Botswana, is a vitally important livelihood. However, its importance is linked to local economic conditions rather than drought *per se*.**
- **Welfare payments (cash and food) remain central to the livelihoods of many households in the region and this is central to off-setting risk**
- **Welfare payments may reduce short term risk and vulnerability to drought, but they can also increase long term dependency.**

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