

NAMIBIA

SUMMARY

The Namibian civil society is remarkably weak and fragmented, despite the absence of apparent limiting factors. The political context is heavily dominated by the SWAPO party but allows for a relatively open and tolerant environment for political organization and a free civil society. While Namibia is experiencing a strong macroeconomic development, socio-economic inequality and poverty among disadvantaged groups is alarming and steadily increasing. Namibia has today one of the world's largest income disparities. HIV/AIDS continue to be a limiting factor for societal development.

Following today's categorization of Namibia as an upper middle income country, the international donor community, including Sweden and the EU, is currently drastically down scaling its development commitments. This risks to further aggravate the exposed situation of the Namibian civil society, today largely, and increasingly, dependent of external funding. Civic engagement, including a wide spread and diversified political mobilization, is therefore at risk of being further mitigated, particularly among marginalized group, and hence concentrated to a few dominant actors.

These circumstances emphasises the importance of the presence of the Olof Palme Center and our development priorities. Together with otherwise favourable political conditions, they constitute a context in which the added value of the Olof Palme Center's engagement for strengthened political participation among marginalized groups in Namibia, is obvious. During 2014, the Olof Palme Center, together with four Swedish member organizations and six Namibian partner organizations, initiates an extended country program in Namibia, focusing on increased popular participation and strengthening women's, unionized workers' and youth's voices in the Namibian society.

POLITICAL SITUATION

Namibia is a member of the United Nations since 1990, as well as of the African Union (AU) and of the Southern African Development Community (SADC). International relations with neighboring countries, particularly South Africa, Botswana, Angola, Zimbabwe and Zambia are good, and characterized by the shared recent history of struggle for national sovereignty and against white minority rule.

Namibia has a population of approximately 2,2 million, of which around 50% identify themselves as belonging to the dominating Ovambo tribe. Largest minorities are Kavangos (9%), Hereros (7%), whites (6%) and mixed (6,5%).

The political situation in Namibia since independence from South African occupation in 1990 has been characterized by relative political stability and absence of major conflicts. Nonetheless, the legacy of a century of German colonization and racist minority rule is still apparent in Namibian society. The political landscape is strongly polarized and the ruling South-West Africa Peoples' Organisation (SWAPO) – party, holding a qualified majority of parliamentary seats since popular rule was introduced 1990 (64 of 72 seats in the National Assembly general elections 2009), is still largely basing its political legitimacy on its role as liberators.

SWAPO successfully led the armed resistance struggle against South African occupation and apartheid policies from the mid-1960:s before transforming into a political party by the time of independence 1990. Many civil society organizations, such as the major trade unions, are often de facto affiliated to the SWAPO-party. Political opposition is weak and fragmented. The largest opposition party Rally for Democracy and Progress currently holds 8 out of 72 seats in parliament.

SWAPO has continued to consolidate its dominance in Namibian politics, but has in recent times proven able to renew its leadership. Sam Nujoma, the country's first democratically elected president, was in 2005 succeeded by Hifikepunye Pohamba, completing his constitutionally allowable two terms in March 2015. In the 2012 SWAPO party congress, Prime Minister Hage Geingob, was re-elected as SWAPO vice president in November 2012 and is expected to run as SWAPO's candidate for president in the 2014 election, Nangolo Mbumba, known as a reformer, was elected party Secretary General.

The SWAPO-party continues to extensively base its political message and position on its role as freedom fighters. A process of renewal within the political elite and a development towards a more future-oriented political program is expected to be required in order to preserve its status.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC SITUATION¹

Namibia has enjoyed striking economic successes since independence, resulting from sound economic management and good governance. At independence Namibia had a well-functioning physical infrastructure, rich natural resources, and a relatively efficient public administration. GDP Growth rate has established itself among 5% annually.

However, Namibia's growing resources continue to be extremely unequally distributed, and nearly all major sources of growth depend heavily on Namibia's fragile ecosystem. These factors have led to a permanent extreme unemployment rates, and

¹ World Bank Country Report 2013 (<http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/namibia/overview>)

inequality has increased since independence and introduction of democracy despite imposing growth rates. Namibia ranks 128 out of 187 countries in the 2012 UNDP Human Development Index. The same year, Namibia was the most unequal, in terms of income distribution, among all countries in the world with more than one million inhabitants. Still, percentage of the population living in absolute poverty (below US\$1.25/day) decreased from 49% 1993 to 21% in 2009.

The global neo-liberal trend of the 1990's largely characterized the first decade of independent Namibia's economic policies. Still, and similar to several of its neighboring countries, Namibia has put particular effort into improving basic public services, such as education, primary health care and access to clean water. Social welfare programs specifically targeting elderly, disabled, orphans, vulnerable children, and war veterans are in place, as well as legal provision for maternity leave and sick leave.

Namibia has made significant progress towards meeting the Millennium Development Goals set for education, environment and gender equality, while those relating to child mortality maternal health and HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases remain far from achieved.

Although extractive industries are the driving force behind the Namibian economy, agriculture remains the largest sector for employment and the primary source of income for 40% of Namibians. Income disparity between rural and urban areas continues to be striking. Formal employment is particularly low among women.

Post-independence repatriation of SWAPO party elite from exile in Europe and the United States in the early 1990's has accentuated the popular perception of a political privileged class, alongside with the white minority population.

20 years after independence, colonial and pre-democracy land ownership structures are largely preserved in Namibia. Vocal representatives of the ruling party have advocated for radical Zimbabwe-inspired reform initiatives, the subsequent collapse of Zimbabwe's economy, however, making such developments highly unlikely to materialize.

The recently announced 600% tax increase on land ownership has sparked protests among land owners, while being welcomed by social equality advocates. The land distribution issue remains at the top of the political agenda in Namibia and among the most important challenges to Namibia's development towards a more equalitarian and harmonious society.

HUMAN RIGHTS AND GENDER EQUALITY²

Namibia's constitution is often referred to as one of the world's most modern in the world, with a clear and extensive rights-based approach in many areas, such as freedom of association, free media and gender equality. Namibia has signed and ratified all the major international human rights conventions, including UN International covenants on civil and political rights and economic, social and cultural rights (1966), prohibition of racial discrimination (1966), apartheid (1973), discrimination against women (1979), the rights of the child (1979), torture (1984), migrant workers (1990) and disabilities (2006). Death penalty is prohibited by law since 1990.

Compared to several of its neighboring countries, Namibia appears to host a relatively weak and fragmented civil society, despite seeming absence of external restraining factors, such as limitations in respect for fundamental political freedoms. Political diversity is, in practice, relatively limited, resulting in a nearly total governmental and administrative dominance of the ruling party. There are repeated reports of SWAPO-party affiliates, particularly representatives from its youth-branch SPYL, having disturbed and interrupted political rallies of political opponents, without adequate police response.

The Law provides for the right to collective bargaining and to form and join trade unions, however excluding employees in "essential services" such as public health and safety. The right to strike is granted and widely practiced, but limited to disputes regarding specific worker-interests such as salaries. Worker's rights are generally protected by law but often far from effectively enforced by public authorities. The main trade unions are as a rule closely affiliated with the SWAPO-party.

Overall, the Human Rights situation in Namibia is improving and in several aspects more satisfactory than in neighboring countries such as Zimbabwe and South Africa. Nonetheless, a number of areas stand out among those particularly preoccupying:

Women's rights and gender equality. Namibian society is characterized by a strong patriarchal tradition and gender continues to be the most striking and systematic ground for inequality in opportunities. The law prohibits gender-based discrimination, including employment discrimination; however, men continued to dominate positions in upper management in both the private and the public sectors. Responsible state authorities fail to satisfactorily implement and supervise the adherence to protective mechanisms. Gender based sexual harassment is explicitly prohibited under the 1992 Namibian labor law but up until 2012 only one case had been brought to court. The law prohibits discriminatory practices against women married under the civil law, while those married under customary law generally are deprived effective protective instruments. Local and traditional practices in Ovambo, Herero and Lozi regions permit family members to confiscate property from widows and children, and widows

² United States Department of State: Human Rights Namibia, 2012 (<http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/204361.pdf>)

are forced to marriage with male relatives of their deceased husbands. The Namibian government has adopted an ambitious national plan combatting gender based violence for the period 2012-2016, including a zero-tolerance campaign for gender-based violence and human trafficking. Failure to effective implementation is particularly apparent in marginalized communities, where impunity among offenders, including law enforcement officers, is nearly absolute. Rape reporting frequency is increasing from low numbers, however believed to represent only a fraction of true numbers. The right to abortion remains severely restricted.

Deep-rooted patriarchal structures are intensely challenged by women's rights organizations and equal-opportunity movements. Overall, government policies on gender equality appear relatively progressive and ambitious, although rarely fully and effectively implemented, resulting in a "love-hate relationship" between activists and responsible authorities.

Children's rights, including violence, sexual abuse and the right to education. Sexual offences against minors are widespread and represent over half of reported cases of sexual crime in several regions of Namibia. There are no nationwide systematic studies made on the prevalence of violence against children. Universal, compulsory and tuition-free primary and secondary school is provided for by the constitution, but is in practice restricted by fees on uniforms, books and boarding, placing a heavy burden on poor families. Still, 98% attend primary school, while children belonging to the San-community are particularly affected by school-drop-outs. Although prohibited under national law, child marriage under customary ceremonies is sometimes de facto tolerated. Sexual initiation rituals for young girls, sometimes under torture-like circumstances involving their older male relatives, is occurring in certain communities.

Discrimination and persecution based on sexual orientation. Discrimination against bi- and homosexual persons is widespread and socially accepted among large segments of Namibian society. Although not codified, democratic Namibia preserved criminalization of same-sex sexual activity between men from the pre-independence legal system. Leading political figures continue to publicly denounce homosexuality, and discrimination, including from public and law enforcement officials is prevalent. An effective legal framework for protection of LGBT-rights is missing.

Social and economic rights. The striking socioeconomic inequalities resulting from insufficient and ineffective wealth distribution policies constitute an apparent root cause for the marginalization of exposed communities, and the failure to protect fundamental social and economic rights of its members. Democratic Namibia inherited a well-developed infrastructure, however vastly concentrated to in and around the capital area, leaving remote communities with poor access to essential public services. A large but modestly populated territory together with insufficient resources prevents the Namibian government from providing satisfactory health care facilities in large parts of the country. Hiv and aids, tuberculosis and malaria continue to pose severe obstacles to sustainable improvements of public health. The hiv-prevalence, although stabilizing in recent years, is among the world's highest, at approximately 18%.

Estimates suggest public medication programs reaches 80% of all persons living with hiv/aids, while failing to comprise marginalized communities predominantly in the north of the country.

CIVIL SOCIETY³

Since 1990, Namibia has been hailed as one of the functioning democracies in Africa. The Constitution is among the most democratic in the world. Most of the older democracies have constitutions that hardly have any gender balance. The Namibian constitution is the first one in the world to be written in a gender-neutral language.

The year 2014 marks 24 years since Namibia gained political independence from South Africa. However, the policies of divide and rule that were entrenched during the apartheid era, left the country with deep scars of inequalities at different levels such as gender, ethnicity/race, rural/urban. Since independence however, the inequalities are no longer only pronounced on the level of race, but class. The largest number of Namibians remains poor-many of who are classified as workers by the broad definition. The population statistics reveals that Namibia has about 2.1 million people, with more than half who are below the age of 20 and many below age 15.

Today after 24 years of independence, one can count not less than 500 active civil society organizations involved in development-related activities. A few of them are specialized interest groups and have had greater impact on Namibia's functioning democracy. Over the years, some of these organizations have been a thorn in the eye of the government.

The other types of civil society organizations in Namibia are those that have a normal working relationship with the government. The national trade union confederation NUNW has an alliance with the ruling party, SWAPO. Its membership cuts across all of both private and public sectors. The union movement is a formidable force in Namibia's economic development program. Due to NUNW's strategic alliance with SWAPO, most national policies are not developed in direct conflict with the union.

Most of the civil society organizations maintain a good working relationship with the government. Civil society that disagree with government risk to be castigated and marginalized. Civil society in general is still viewed with suspicion and seen as foreign controlled. Despite the abnormal relationship with civil society organizations critical to its policies, the government has not impeded the activities of such organizations.

In order to strengthen democratic practice in Namibia, there is need for tolerance to be emphasized. Namibia has democratic structures in place and has the capacity to enforce and uphold the law. Many of the civil society organizations work towards

³ World Bank development indicators 2011, Human Development Report – UNDP, www.undp.org, Multiparty Democracy and Elections in Namibia – EISA Research Report, www.content.eisa.org.za

creating voice, visibility, participation and leadership of the disadvantaged people of Namibia.

DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION

All major foreign donors in Namibia, including Sweden, Germany, Finland, the United Kingdom and the EU, as well as several German political foundations, are currently in the process of drastically down-scaling their development commitments in Namibia. Next to the Olof Palme Center, Afrikagrupperna (Africa Groups Sweden) remains the only Swedish development cooperation presence in the country.

At independence 1990, Namibia became a prioritized country for Swedish development cooperation, following decades of active Swedish support for SWAPO and the anti-apartheid liberation struggle. Swedish development cooperation was until 2007 focused on public sector development and has since gone through a process of gradual decrease. The embassy closed in 2008 and all Swedish bilateral development cooperation is phasing out by the end of 2013.

Sweden's solidarity with the Namibian people is remembered and strongly appreciated among Namibian authorities and public. Sweden is often being referred to by leading Namibia officials as a paragon of democratic system, social model and international solidarity. The disappointment over recent year's decrease of Swedish engagement is apparent.

Recent years' declining Swedish presence in Namibia clearly fails in appreciating the potential of Swedish-Namibian relations for a continued active engagement in Namibia. This not least in the light of recent decades' shrinking role of Sweden on the foreign policy arena.

Despite a relatively free and friendly political environment, Namibian civil society organizations, such as trade unions and women's rights movements, struggle in an environment of dependence on government relations, strong reliance on international donors and drastically shrinking access to funding.

The Olof Palme Center's focus on non-discrimination, accountability, transparency and participation is clearly corresponding to the needs and priorities of the current and foreseen civil society partnerships. The Center's Namibia civil society program starting 2014 aims at contributing to a free and strengthened, including grass root level, civil society, effective government implementation of human rights and political freedoms, increased political equality, and combatting discrimination of women and girls. It includes six Namibian partner organizations, operating in the areas of worker's rights/trade union rights, women's rights and the rights of children/youth, and will engage four Swedish member organizations. The Swedish workers movement's high degree of legitimacy in all sectors of Namibian society opens many doors and further stresses the added value of continued and extended presence.

In conclusion, an environment of relative stability and absence of apparent restraining political factors, coupled with extreme economic inequalities, widespread

socioeconomic marginalization and an exposed and civil society with shrinking funding opportunities, emphasizes the relevance of the Olof Palme Center, its partnerships and priorities in Namibia.

PROGRAMME OBJECTIVES

Programme objective

Strengthened respect for the rights of women, workers and young people for a more equitable society

Intermediate objective 1

Women, workers and young people have increased knowledge and awareness about their rights

Intermediate objective 2

Target groups have strengthened their capacity to influence political decision making

Intermediate objective 3

The Palme Center partner organisations have strengthened their capacity to represent the target groups.