

Chapter 12

San Farmworkers

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San farmworkers and their children on a commercial farm in Otjozondjupa Region

12.1 Introduction

Since colonial times, a large proportion of Namibia's San population have worked in the agricultural sector. The primary reason for this is that they were dispossessed of their traditional land, first by incoming Bantu groups at the beginning of the 19th century, and then by the establishment of commercial farms at the beginning of the 20th century. As they could no longer hunt and gather veldfood, the San were forced to adapt their livelihood strategies, hence they took up work on the farms. A participant in our research discussions in Outjo summed up the changing situation this way: "Before Independence, when white farmers fenced off the land, the Hai||om became farmworkers."

Our research discussions revealed that work in the agricultural sector was still a very important source of income for the San in 2012, but the context of this work has changed dramatically since Independence. While acknowledging that farmworkers from other ethnic groups may face similar

problems today, the situation of the San is uniquely informed by their history; their being forced to work as cheap labourers on farms; their lack of alternative income opportunities; and the high levels of discrimination that San farmworkers face. In this chapter we look at San farmworkers' present living and working conditions and how they have changed since Independence. Our analyses are based on data drawn from our own research as well as surveys such as the national censuses, other academic sources and news articles.¹

The data extrapolated from our own research derives from discussions that we convened for this study in four regions: Otjozondjupa, Omaheke, Kunene and Oshikoto Regions. The research team visited one commercial farm in Otjozondjupa where we interviewed San farmworkers as well as the owners of the applicable farm. Visits to additional farms to gather more in-depth data on San farmworkers' living conditions were not possible simply because gaining access to farmworkers is very challenging and time consuming.² Due to this constraint, the team decided to rely on the data gathered in the above-mentioned four regions as well as existing literature. To complement this data, interviews were held in Windhoek with personnel of the Namibia Agricultural Union (NAU), the Namibian National Farmers Union (NNFU) and the Labour Resource and Research Institute (LaRRI).³

In the next section of this chapter we provide background information on the history of farming in Namibia and the labour laws and minimum wage agreements introduced after Independence in 1990. Thereafter we consider the impacts of these laws on San farmworkers, examine their living and working conditions, briefly discuss the matter of access to land, and draw some conclusions.

12.2 Background on farming in Namibia

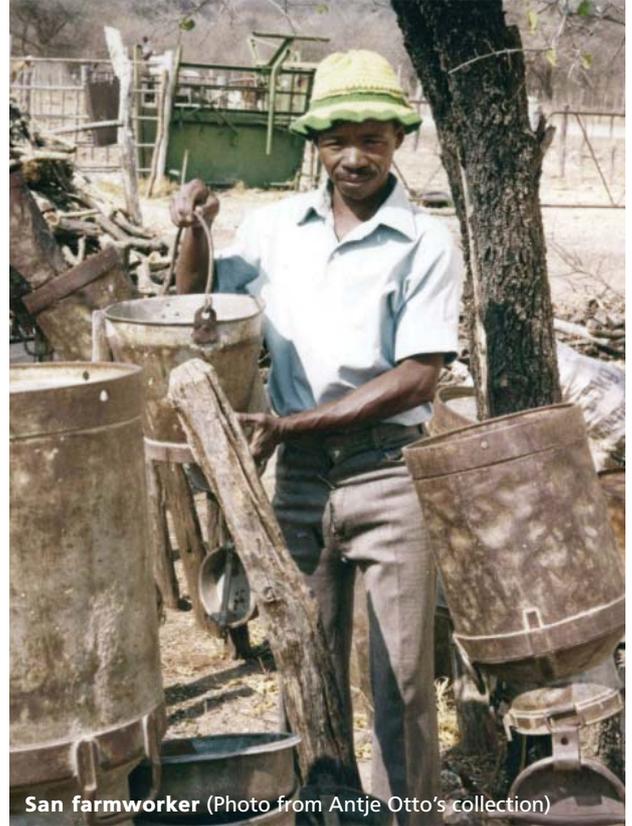
Given Namibia's aridity and unpredictable rainfall, commercial farming is a challenging endeavour in this country. Before Independence, the state provided loans, subsidies and other forms of support to commercial farmers to help them to counteract the difficulties encountered. In addition to this financial support, cheap generational labour contributed substantially to the economic viability of the commercial farms, and existing laws gave the farmers far-reaching rights and powers over workers on their land (Suzman 2001b: 12). The Masters and Servants Proclamation of 1920, for example, allowed the farmers to exact penalties for "withholding effort, desertion and unauthorised absence from work", which were all deemed to constitute crimes (Gordon and Douglas 2000: 140). Due to the geographical isolation of many farms and an inadequate police presence, they could develop

¹ Various authors have written about San farmworkers, focusing predominantly on those in Omaheke Region. Some of these authors analysed different aspects of the livelihoods of San farmworkers: their general working conditions (Suzman 1995); indigenous identity among them (Averill 2010 and Sylvain 2002 and 2003); relationships between the farmworkers and the farmers employing them (Averill 2010; Sylvain 2001); gender aspects (Sylvain 1999); and the impact of alcohol consumption on social relations (Sylvain 2006). Other authors, e.g. Devereux et al. (1996) and Karamata (2006), dealt more generally with the living and working conditions of farmworkers in Namibia.

² Both Averill and Sylvain describe the difficulties and the lengthy process involved in gaining access to farms on which San work (Averill 2010: 21; Sylvain 2006: 134). The farm owner must grant permission for access to the farm before any interview can take place, thus a relationship of trust between the researcher and the farm owner is a prerequisite. For this study, making contact with farmworkers on communal farms proved extremely difficult as the research team could not build on existing contacts and networks to establish this trust.

³ The NAU, established in 1951, spearheads organised agriculture in Namibia. It represents the country's commercial farmers, and has established itself well as their mouthpiece and mediator. The NNFU is a national federation of regional farmers' unions, established in 1992 to serve as a mouthpiece for communal and emerging farmers. The Namibia Farm Workers Union (NAFWU), established in 1994, represents the country's farmworkers. This union was dysfunctional at the time of our field research, thus an interview was not possible.

San farmworkers (Photo from Antje Otto's collection)



San farmworker (Photo from Antje Otto's collection)

relatively independently as “total institutions” with minimal state interference (Du Toit 1992, cited in Suzman 1995: 12). Furthermore, the Trespass Ordinance 3 of 1962 prohibited unauthorised access to farms, thereby hindering the political organisation of the farmworkers. All told, “Workers in the agricultural sector have ... always constituted a marginal and vulnerable section of the labour force.” (Devereux et al. 1996: 1)

Today the agricultural sector is a significant contributor to the country’s economy and a key means of survival for many Namibians, providing a livelihood to 27.4% of the Namibian labour force (Namibia Statistics Agency (NSA) 2013: 9). The 2008 Namibia Labour Force Survey found that the agricultural sector accommodated the highest number of workers who had never attended school (52.1%), followed by the highest number of workers who had attended primary school only (27.0%) (Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare (MLSW) 2008: 58).⁴ These figures indicate that the agricultural sector is the most important in the country in terms of providing work for people with no education or a very low level of education.

In November 1992, the Namibian Parliament passed the Labour Act 6 of 1992.⁵ This Act gave farmworkers the same rights as other workers had, for the first time, and it also defined additional rights for farmworkers, such as the right to adequate housing, the right to cultivate land and keep livestock under certain circumstances, and the right to protection against exploitation through farm shops (Devereux et al. 1996: 9). Nevertheless, a study conducted four years later found that, “The situation of farmworkers has not changed much since the Labour Act of 1992 was passed, as farmers still continue to exploit them.” (Devereux et al. 1996: 1)

⁴ Unlike the 2008 survey report, the *Namibia Labour Force Survey 2012 Report* (NSA 2013b) does not provide a breakdown of the levels of education of the farm labour force specifically.

⁵ The Labour Act 11 of 2007 repeals both the Labour Act 6 of 1992 and the Labour Act 15 of 2004, which was brought into force only partially.

The first minimum wage for farmworkers was introduced in 2003, following an agreement between agricultural employers and the Namibia Farm Workers Union (NAFWU). The minimum wage was set at N\$2,20 per hour (amounting to N\$429 per month for a 45-hour working week). In addition to this cash wage, employers had to provide food and accommodation. In December 2009 the minimum wage was raised to N\$2,87 per hour (amounting to N\$560 per month), and workers were further entitled to “food or rations ... which value should not exceed the equivalent of 35% of the employee’s basic wage” or “... an additional allowance of at least N\$300.00 per month”.⁶ Karamata reported in 2006 that only 14.4% of all farmworkers in the country knew of the minimum wage, and only half of those who knew of it also knew the amount to which they were entitled (Karamata 2006: 31) – and it is likely that the number of San who knew was even lower due to their high level of illiteracy. Karamata further indicated that only 54.8% of all farm owners countrywide had implemented the minimum wage by that time. However, the situation varied greatly between farm categories: whereas almost all owners of commercial farms had implemented the minimum wage, only 14% of communal farmers had done so (Karamata 2006: 31). Over the years, most communal farmers and emerging commercial farm owners have complained that it is impossible for them to implement the minimum wage due to their low levels of income. In February 2010, NAFWU launched a wage campaign because a large number of farm owners had not complied with the new regulations (*The Namibian*, Jana-Mari Smith, 8 February 2010). The NNFU Executive Director revealed in our interview with him for this study that most of the communal farmers still found it difficult to adhere to the minimum wage agreement, and that some communal farmers still did not know about this agreement.

Box 12.1: Life history of a former San farmworker from Otjinene, Omaheke Region

Jan was born on a commercial farm at Epukiro RC^a in 1956. He grew up on the farm, and worked there as a farm boy looking after the calves. At that time he was paid N\$6 per month. When the farmer died, another farmer bought the farm, and in 1964 this new owner forced Jan’s family – which included seven children – to move out. The family went to Otjinene^b where Jan started to work at farms in the area owned by Herero farmers, mainly fixing farm fences. The first of these farm owners “was not a good man” – reportedly he insulted and beat his workers regularly. “This was during the South West Africa time, before our independence. As you know people were beaten.” Consequently Jan left that farm. One of the other farmers for whom he worked did not pay his salary: “I only worked for him for a year and he paid me nothing for that whole time, only eating food, so I left.” He moved to another farm where he worked for six years. Here he looked after the cattle and goats, and was also responsible for milking the animals. He was paid N\$30 per month, but was not given any food rations; instead he ate with the farmer’s family. Then he and the farmer had misunderstandings about money: “He did not want to pay me and he just wanted me to work without pay.” Hence Jan started doing piecework such as building camps and kraals at different farms. He said that his life is not going well and he always has to wait for piecework: “If there is no piecework then I have nothing. Now we get some food from the government, but it is not enough.”

^a “RC” stands for Roman Catholic. The settlement of Epukiro (120 km north-east of Gobabis), was established in 1902 when the Roman Catholic Church bought the 30 000 ha farm Epukiro, which today comprises a cluster of small settlements, at the centre of which is the Catholic mission station. Epukiro RC refers to the original settlement area. (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Epukiro>)

^b Otjinene is a village located ±160 km north of Gobabis. The village is surrounded by communal land on which there are many other villages and many communal farms.

⁶ Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare (2007), “Declaration of Extension of Collective Agreement: Agricultural Industry: Labour Act, 2007” (Government Notice, *Government Gazette* No. 4390, 14 December 2009).

12.3 Impacts of the introduction of labour laws and the minimum wage agreement on San farmworkers

Suzman reported in 2001 that nearly half of all San in Namibia were generational farmworkers or family members of farmworkers (Suzman 2001b).⁷ However, after the introduction of the Labour Act in 1992, farmers started to retrench their workers, and the introduction of the minimum wage in 2003 exacerbated this situation. There are no recent statistics on San farmworkers, but our analyses of the existing literature and the information obtained in our interviews for this study suggest that the retrenchments must have had a disproportionate effect on San farmworkers since farm owners had always tended to dismiss them first when jobs were cut. Thus the number of San employed as farmworkers has probably declined considerably since Suzman's report. The Chief Executive Officer of the Gobabis Town Council indicated in our interview that San farmworkers face a higher risk of being dismissed – on both commercial and communal farms: “Most farms are now owned by us. And if I move in, I rather have somebody from my own family working there. Your former boss left, he sold the farm so you can see what you do. This is also something that pushes people out of the farm.” Many of the former San farmworkers were pushed onto the fringes of peri-urban areas around towns such as Outjo, Grootfontein and Gobabis, or into larger settlements or communal areas, or into the corridors between commercial farms. Towns like Gobabis and Outjo have subsequently struggled to cope with the high influx of homeless and jobless people.

“After Independence the wages were improved and the farmer could not afford to have a lot of workers on the farm, and they chased away the San people. Before Independence even the young San boys could make some income by opening gates for the farmer when he was visiting the camp posts, and at the end of the month he would buy him clothes and also give him money.”

– Discussion participant in Epako (informal settlement in Gobabis)

Besides precipitating a reduction in the number of farmworkers, the new labour laws also formalised the relationship between the farm owners and their workers for the first time. Before these laws came into force, farmers generally regarded themselves as their workers' parent or *baas* (Afrikaans for 'boss'),⁸ thus they conceived their role as one that involved a responsibility for educating, training and assisting their workers financially and otherwise, but also a responsibility for disciplining and punishing them (Suzman 1999: 57). Later, many farmers reduced their financial and material support to levels that simply met the minimum requirements. The NNFU Executive Director explained in our interview that the introduction of the minimum wage negatively influenced the social relationship between the farmers and their labourers, specifically on communal farms:

“We need to treat the minimum wage policy very carefully because many communal farmers say that if they give them the minimum wages, why should they go an extra mile to give them better food and other social assistance. Before the introduction of the minimum wage limit, farmers considered the workers as part of their households. They would also go an extra mile to meet their social needs even if they could not pay them the salary in terms of money. You would find a worker getting clothes, food, bits of money and accommodation. This culture is fading away with the introduction of the minimum wage policy.”

⁷ This finding was probably based on the 1999 census counts. It is likely that the real percentage was far lower since farmers had retrenched considerable numbers of their workers since Independence (see discussion further on).

⁸ This relationship has been described in the literature as the “*baasskap* principle” (see for example Silvain 2001) – literal translation ‘boss-ship’, i.e. ‘domination’, based on the principle that ‘the white man must always be boss’.

San farmworkers – undoubtedly along with those from other ethnic groups – still face rights abuses by farm owners despite the laws in place. San participants in our research discussions mentioned non-payment of wages,⁹ unpaid annual leave, unpaid overtime work, deductions for sick leave, and farmers ‘hiring’ out workers to neighbouring farms without additional payment – abuses also reported by Averill (2010: 29, 31-37). In addition, some farmers failed to register their San employees with the Social Security Commission (SSC), which is in conflict with the labour law provision that all Namibian employees are entitled to SSC benefits (*New Era*, Surihe Gaomas, 4 July 2007). Reportedly this failure has been pervasive in Omaheke: “The exploitation of the minority San is prevalent in the Omaheke region, where hundreds of them are employed as farmworkers without being registered with the Social Security Commission (SSC).” (*New Era*, Staff Reporter, 10 March 2006)¹⁰

San, from the outset of their history as farmworkers, have had difficulties in accessing information about the labour laws, hence their knowledge of their rights remains sketchy today. The Director of the Labour Resource and Research Institute (LaRRI) pointed out that NAFWU had allegedly neglected to educate farmworkers about their rights. The farms’ remoteness, and the high illiteracy rates among farmworkers, make it difficult to implement measures to ensure farmworkers’ awareness and comprehension of the laws governing the agricultural sector. Conversely, farm owners access legislation easily, and their higher levels of education and knowledge of administrative procedures place them in a much more powerful position than their workers (Averill 2010: 45).

All told, the introduction of the Labour Act 6 of 1992 and the first minimum wage agreement in 2003 brought mixed results for the farmworkers generally and for San farmworkers in particular. Wages and living and working conditions were improved on some farms, and physical coercion was prohibited, but the increased wage bill forced farmers to reduce their labour force in a way that had a disproportionate effect on San farmworkers.

San farmworkers tended to refrain from reporting rights abuses for three reasons essentially: the long distances to towns where complaints can be registered; the requirement of completing formal documentation; and the rumours about discrimination and bad treatment of San. San participants in our research discussions also alleged that farm owners bribed labour officers. Not only do these factors hinder the San in exercising the rights that the labour laws give them, but they also speak to a deep mistrust in the system and its players – which further constrains the San from approaching the labour inspectors. Ethnic affiliations and the associated skewed access to information play a major role in this apparent mistrust.¹¹ A discussion participant in Tsintsabis, Oshikoto Region, even questioned whether some ethnic groups were exempted from adhering to the labour laws.

“The problem with the labour law is that if you didn’t agree on terms with the farmer and you left and then went to the labour inspector, the farmer would tell his neighbour not to employ you – he would say you are a thief or difficult. Word would travel so you wouldn’t be able to get employment. Then you would come to Outjo and you would need to find an open space for your corrugated iron shack.”

– Discussion participant in Outjo, Kunene Region

⁹ Averill notes that the Omaheke Labour Inspector stated in an interview that non-payment of wages was the most common complaint received from farmworkers (Averill 2010: 29). Dieckmann also reported on this issue (Dieckmann 2007b: 284-285).

¹⁰ The lack of an ID for registration might be one reason that so many San farmworkers are not registered for social security cover.

¹¹ Further complicating the situation is that there are only 56 labour inspectors for all sectors in Namibia (according to the Director of LaRRI), which affects the inspectors’ ability to control the implementation of legislation on the farms adequately.

A Ju'hoan farmworker's wife in the couple's house on a commercial farm



12.4 Living and working conditions of San farmworkers

Many San farmworkers in Namibia are the second, third or even fourth generation of farmworkers in their family, who learned their skills growing up on the farms where their parents and grandparents worked.¹² Their duties generally include erecting fences, herding cattle and small stock, welding, gardening and repairing vehicles. Averill reported that most of her interviewees had ties to the farms on which they worked: they were either born or raised on the farm, or had relatives working there (Averill 2010: 27). Other San farmworkers have been more mobile; some have worked on as many as 10 farms (Sylvain 2002: 1077). Since the outset of the San's history of working on farms, a certain level of itinerancy has prevailed as a coping strategy to counteract insecure working conditions. However, as employment became scarcer on commercial farms, and with the living and working conditions on communal farms proving insufficient to support livelihoods, many San exhibited an increasing degree of mobility as they moved about in search of better employment opportunities or assistance from family members. They usually visited farms where relatives worked, and asked for positions there, but sometimes they received only shelter and food from their kin before moving on, because farmers discouraged extended stays by relatives on the farms – thus usually farmworkers' relatives could stay for only a couple of days before they had to leave. A discussion participant in Epako (informal settlement in Gobabis) said, "Farmers do not allow people to go back and visit their relatives; they tell us [the San] that it is not place for us to come and relax." Some farmworkers live in the corridors between farms.¹³

¹² These could be white-owned commercial farms, Affirmative Action Loan Scheme (AALS) farms or communal-area farms.

¹³ See also Sylvain 2002: 1078.

Living and working conditions for farmworkers are not homogenous but vary considerably across regions and according to the different farm categories (established commercial farms, emerging commercial farms and communal farms). The general picture that emerged from our research is as follows:

- Established commercial farmers offered the best housing conditions and the highest wages.
- Emerging commercial farmers offered somewhat lower wages and less-favourable material conditions than those offered on established commercial farms.
- Communal farmers offered the lowest wages and the least-favourable material conditions.¹⁴

The Special Advisor to the Omaheke Regional Governor confirmed in an interview that the living and working conditions are far more difficult for San farmworkers on communal farms than on commercial farms, given that communal farmers have far less in the way of financial capital.

The farm categorisation of farm owners outlined above was discussed at all of the sites visited for the research on San farmworkers, and all discussion participants agreed that the commercial farmers offered the best living and working conditions.

“Commercial workers may also treat San workers badly. There are differences among farmers. But generally the commercial farmers are better than communal farmers.”

– Special Advisor to the Omaheke Regional Governor

“Black commercial farmers treat us worse than white farmers. Once a black farmer buys a farm, he dismisses all Hai||om employers and brings in his own people.”

– Discussion participant in Outjo, Kunene Region

With regard to wages, the data compiled from the discussions suggests that San farmworkers generally still earn less than those from other ethnic groups. There are no recent figures available on differences in wage levels by ethnic group. However, in 1995 the Farmworkers Project of the Legal Assistance Centre collected data on the differences in wages according to ethnic group, and this data showed that the incomes of the San farmworkers were far lower than those of any other ethnic group (Katjiuanjo et al. 1997).

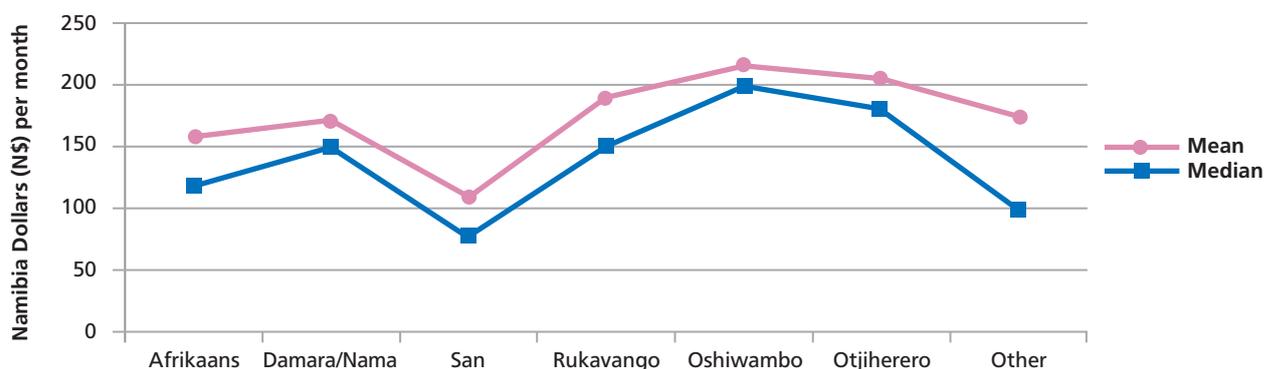
With the introduction of the minimum wage in 2003, this situation should have changed, but our research brought to light a number of individual cases of San farmworkers being paid less than their non-San colleagues. There are various reasons for San earning lower wages than others, but their high dependency on farm employment (due to a lack of alternatives) combined with a lack of knowledge of the relevant laws and their rights as farmworkers, place the San in an extremely weak bargaining position.¹⁵ For example, the NNFU Executive Director reported that San farmworkers

¹⁴ Karamata reports further on disparities in wage levels within the commercial farming areas. The wage ranges for farmworkers were lowest in Omaheke Region and Grootfontein District, and highest in Khomas Region and the Khomas Hochfeld. Karamata attributes the differences across the regions and the similarities within a single region to the fact that farmers influence one another as regards the payments and working/living conditions that they offer to their employees, and also to the fact that “the close proximity of Grootfontein and Gobabis to communal areas contributes to a high supply of farm labour to commercial farms as opposed to Khomas where farm labourers are scarce” (Karamata 2006: 27). Participants in our discussions did not refer to wage differences between regions – probably because they move from place to place within a single region and rarely move to a new region.

¹⁵ Devereux, Katjiuanjo and Van Rooy found that 92% of the San interviewed had not negotiated their terms of employment, with the result that they were paid less and received fewer benefits than the non-San farmworkers (Devereux et al. 1996: 76).

tend to get lower wages than farmworkers from other ethnic groups specifically because they are less informed about their rights as employees. Discussion participants stated that some farmers did not honour the verbal agreements made about payment or food rations: reportedly the farmers would generally agree to pay a worker a certain amount of money, but the amount actually paid would usually be less than the amount promised. Farmworkers from other ethnic groups also tended to have higher wages because farmers assumed that they would work better and harder than the San. This assumption stems from the persistent stereotyping of San as people who are unreliable, addicted to alcohol and physically weaker than other ethnic groups. This perception has not only led to ever-decreasing numbers of San farmworkers being employed, but also it has positioned them low down in the labour hierarchy.¹⁶ More and more, diminishing job opportunities on commercial farms compel the San to seek work in the communal areas, where wages and benefits are generally far less favourable than on commercial farms. The consequence of this combination of factors is that San farmworkers earn lower incomes than other farmworkers in Namibia.

Farmworkers' cash wage per month by home language (1995)



Source: Katjuuanjo, Ndaugendapo and Shipiki, Legal Assistance Centre, 1997: 6

The rations to which farmworkers are entitled by virtue of the minimum wage agreement do not sustain the workers and their families for a full month, thus the farmworkers have to purchase food and other necessities at farm shops, at prices set by the farm owner. This system ties many San to the farmer through a “system of debt-bondage” (Sylvain 2002: 1077). In recent years farm owners have tended to reduce the rations for workers and increase their cash payments, and this has increased the workers’ dependency on the purchases which they are forced to make at the farm shops, hence the debt-bondage system has become a widespread problem for San farmworkers.¹⁷ Often it is unclear to the farmworkers how much the different items cost, and how much is deducted from their wages as debt repayment, as their high level of illiteracy makes it difficult for them to monitor the calculations. A discussion participant in the village of Goreseb in Omaheke Region said, “Sometimes he shows me the credit balance in advance [and] sometimes he just tells you what remains.” The Special Advisor to the Omaheke Regional Governor stated that although most commercial farmers adhered to the minimum wage, rations and purchases at the farm store would be deducted from the wages owing at the end of the month, often leaving their workers with little money. In Goreseb a discussion participant stressed that indebtedness due to purchases at the farm shop was a challenge that most of the San farmworkers had to grapple with; it left them with only a small percentage of their wages at month end.

¹⁶ Suzman reported in 1995 that Ju’|hoan and Damara were still the labourers of choice in Omaheke (Suzman 1995: 21), but this does not appear to be the case today. In our study, San and other interviewees reported that the opportunities for employment on farms have diminished considerably for San over the years. The large influx of San former farmworkers to Omaheke informal settlements is a clear indication of this change in the situation.

¹⁷ Averill describes that almost all interviewees mentioned debt as being an issue (Averill 2010: 29)



“Life on the farm is more difficult because your wage is measured against the food you are eating on the farm and it will be deducted at the end of the month. Nowadays, people do not get free meat or milk. People are even buying firewood which they should collect for free on the farms.”

– Discussion participant in Epako, Gobabis, Omaheke Region

Discussion participants’ statements regarding the rations provided to them on the farms varied considerably, thus the quote in the box above does not exemplify the situation across the board. Some participants reported that life was actually easier on the farms because the workers received “free meat, milk and wood”. The discrepancies in their statements suggests that the ration-distribution situation varied greatly from farm to farm.

Another problem raised by Sylvain (2002), and frequently reported on in the media, is that of San farmworkers being paid by way of alcohol, especially on communal farms. One newspaper quoted Chief Sofia Jakob of the !Xoo TA on this issue (*New Era*, Albertina Nakale, 11 October 2012): “San get booze for work The farmers here [in Omaheke] are paying with alcohol instead of money. They are paid with cheap wine or *tombo* [home-brewed alcohol].” Earlier, in 2010, *New Era* reported that the Omaheke Regional Governor had urged Namibians to stop further marginalising the San through enslavement and rights abuse (*New Era*, Surihe Gaomas, 4 July 2007). The Director of LaRRI noted that this practice originated in the apartheid era, when the so-called “dope system” of compensating workers with alcohol was common: “This happened mostly in times when the employer could not afford to pay the full amount of the salary agreed to.”

The Labour Act 11 of 2007 makes provision for farmworkers to keep livestock on the farms where they work, but the regulations are not very specific; they leave it up to the farm owner to either allow the workers to keep livestock or to compensate them with food or allowances (Labour Act 11

of 2007, section 28). The regulations are implemented differently across the farms, depending on the availability of grazing and water as well as the farm owners' willingness to allow their workers to keep either small or large livestock. However, as San farmworkers do not have their own land, those who keep animals on the farm where they work depend on retaining their job to retain their livestock: moving to another farm might cause problems if the new farm owner has a different view about workers keeping livestock. Dieckmann describes a case in Outjo where a Hai||om farmworker had managed to accumulate a considerable number of livestock (donkeys and horses), but faced severe problems when he moved to another farm because the owner demanded grazing fees for the San workers' livestock. This Hai||om farmworker asserted that if he "... had owned a piece of land, [he] would have been able to make a living from them [the livestock]" (Dieckmann 2007a: 282).

It is important to note that farmworkers identify their livestock – specifically large animals such as cattle – as an important safety net: "If you have livestock and they multiply, when you struggle with finances maybe you can sell one cattle and pay for things like school fees and support your household." (Male farmworker, quoted in Averill 2010: 30)

12.5 Access to land

"Another worrying issue in the Omaheke Region and the entire country is the fact that many San workers were being chased away or dumped in nearby towns, especially when they became sick or were unable to work anymore due to old age. This leaves them in a worse predicament as they are dumped without any kind of payment or compensation for their day-to-day survival or medical care." (New Era, Surihe Gaomas, 4 July 2007)

San farmworkers are especially vulnerable as they do not have the right to remain on the farms if they lose their jobs there, hence job loss begets homelessness. The phenomenon of 'landlessness' is widespread among former farmworkers, and is underlined by the fact that all of the participants in our research discussions in Epako, and most participants in the discussions in Otjinene, were former farmworkers. The participants in Epako listed various reasons for leaving the farms where they had worked and settling in Epako, such as farmers evicting them from the farm because they were too old or very sick (e.g. with TB), or because they had suffered major injuries.¹⁸ The younger participants had simply followed their parents to Epako.

The CEO of the Gobabis Town Council reported as follows in our interview with him:

"They [San living in the informal settlements in Gobabis] are coming from the surrounding farms; they were former farmworkers. The older these people get, the farm owners do not want them anymore, they are just dumped. They [farmworkers] feel it is better in Gobabis; there they are at least being allocated land they can call their own and they can construct their own facilities. So you find people who are open to come to town to also make use of hospitals and shops. It is also a possibility to get something through whatever means, whether it is begging on the streets."

He stressed that the influx of farmworkers from the rural areas to Gobabis had been accelerating over the past few years, and the informal settlements had been growing rapidly. This growth now poses enormous challenges for the Gobabis Municipality. Urban authorities and service providers

¹⁸ One respondent reported that he was expelled from the farm after a workplace accident that caused major injuries to his leg. The informant was born and raised on the farm and had always worked there. His children were still working on the farm, but he was not allowed to visit them.

consider the influx of elderly people – who had to leave the farms due to their age – to be a serious problem. Certain informal settlements are growing so fast due to the influx of farmworkers that the authorities and service providers cannot provide the necessary services to the newcomers. Many former farmworkers have moved onto resettlement farms instead. Those who have worked a lifetime under someone else’s authority consider these farms to be ‘safe havens’. However, relatively accessible resettlement projects such as Drimiopsis (quite close to Gobabis) have been suffering from the substantial influx of former farmworkers – so much so that the sustainability of such projects might be at risk.¹⁹

12.6 Conclusions

This chapter has clearly illustrated that more up-to-date data is needed to fully understand the current livelihoods of San farmworkers. In particular, data and analyses of their living and working conditions on communal farms are gravely lacking, even as employment on these farms has been gaining in importance as a survival strategy for San due to diminishing employment opportunities on commercial farms. Working on communal farms often fails to provide sufficiently for these farmworkers, with the result that many decide to migrate to peri-urban areas. The influx into these areas happens fast and in an unregulated manner, and the municipalities concerned are confronted with enormous challenges such as providing housing, sanitation, schools and other basic services for their rapidly growing populations. Meeting the accommodation needs of a growing population of homeless elderly people is one significant challenge that these municipalities face. Concerted strategies and efforts will be needed to make better provision for former farmworkers in peri-urban areas.

The high level of vulnerability of San farmworkers stems from their failure to secure legal rights to a decent place to live, and their lack of alternative income-generating opportunities – root causes that render them prone to exploitation and lead to extreme poverty. This situation has worsened in the last two decades as more and more farmworkers have been retrenched or otherwise have retired from the farms where they worked, losing their homes as a result. Access to housing is especially important for San farmworkers because they cannot normally seek refuge on farms where their relatives work if they lose their jobs. Instead they end up either living in peri-urban informal housing or overpopulating group resettlement farms (e.g. Drimiopsis, Donkerbos-Sonneblom and Skoonheid), hence the municipal services provided in the peri-urban settlements are no longer adequate, and the farms are not able to sustain their inhabitants.

The introduction of the minimum wage has had unintended and unfortunate consequences for certain groups of workers, and the San farmworkers have been the group most negatively affected. The minimum wage agreement has to be revisited, taking regional differences into account, but also differences between the various farm categories. A thorough implementation strategy will then have to include enforcement policies and an adequate evaluation and monitoring plan. Efforts to bring knowledge of the provisions of the labour laws and the minimum wage agreement to the various interest groups have to be intensified. This applies not only to farmworkers, but also to farm owners and labour inspectors. Procedures have to be transparent and applied consistently to overcome deep-rooted mistrust. A holistic approach is needed, i.e. one that addresses questions of decent housing and alternative income-generating opportunities, with more attention paid to the development of peri-urban areas, which should be able to offer adequate legal rights to housing, local income-generating opportunities, and access to services, not least education.

¹⁹ San interviewed at Farm Uitkoms in Omaheke reported that the initial plan was to resettle 300 people on this farm, but in 2012 around 700 people were living there, a high number of whom had come from the surrounding farms.