

Abstract for paper for the International Symposium, 'Combating Desertification', Cape Town, April 2002

Proposed by:

Poul Wisborg

Research Fellow, Development Studies

"Human rights and land reform in South Africa"

Noragric, Centre for International Environment and Development Studies and

Programme for Land and Agrarian Studies (PLAAS), University of Western Cape

Address until 15 August 2001:

Noragric

Agricultural University of Norway

P.O. Box 5001, NO-1432 Aas

NORWAY

Tel.: + 47 64 94 98 09

Fax: + 47 64 94 07 60

e-mail: poul.wisborg@noragric.nlh.no

Abstract:

'Degrading the land': negotiating environmental perceptions in Namaqualand, South Africa¹

This paper will draw on field research in a Namaqualand rural reserve to document local environmental perceptions, paying particular attention to the link between land rights, 'degradation'-views and development options. It compares local views with the construction of human-environment relations in the *Desertification Convention*, appraising gaps and coherence that impede or facilitate land development.

Within a '*Political ecology*' approach to people-environment relations the paper stresses heterogeneity of communities, resources and policy, and the contested evolution of meanings of 'land', 'tenure rights' and 'degradation' etc. (Blaikie and Brookfield 1987; Peet and Watts 1996; Benjaminsen 1998; Mehta et al. 1999). Discursive practice is an integral part of environmental use (Leach, Mearns, and Scoones 1997) and 'interface' discontinuities and interaction between different actors' goals and perceptions shape management outcomes (Arce and Long 1992). The *Desertification Convention* and the associated national policy discourse may be seen as a development narrative and blue-print for policy and practice: the paper will discuss to what extent it is 'hegemonic' in dominating thinking and being translated into institutionalised practice (Roe 1991; Hajer 1995; Adger, Benjaminsen, Brown and Svarstad 2000).

Preliminary work in Namaqualand indicates that a 'communal' versus 'individual management' debate polarizes local understandings of resource status and management, informed by private ranching models and ecological equilibrium theory (Wisborg 2000). Both defenders and critics of communal management stress sustainability, but whether and how land degradation is occurring is contested among both local people and scientists. The views are linked to the public debate about emerging commercial farmers versus livelihood concerns of the rural majority. A uniting '*economic development discourse*' may, again, be contrasted with an '*eco-centric discourse*' linked to biodiversity conservation initiatives in Namaqualand.

People and organisations supporting dry land development need to critically assess and engage in negotiation of perceptions and knowledge of environmental trends and opportunities.

INTERESTING — 8

INFORMATIVE — 6

PRACTICAL
REALISTIC
USEFUL] — 5

(19)

Reference List

1. Adger, W. Neil, Tor Arve Benjaminsen, Katrina Brown, and Hanne Svarstad. 2000. Advancing a political ecology of global discourses. *CSERGE Working Paper*, no. 10.
2. Arce, Alberto, and Norman Long. 1992. The dynamics of knowledge. Interfaces between bureaucrats and peasants. Chapter 9 in *Battlefields of knowledge. The interlocking of theory and practice in social research and development*. Eds. Norman Long, and Ann Long. London: Routledge.
3. Benjaminsen, Tor Arve. 1998. "Beyond "degradation". Essay on people, land and resources in Mali." Dept. of Geography and International Development Studies, Roskilde University.
4. Blaikie, P., and H. Brookefield, Eds. 1987. *Land degradation and society*. London and New York: Methuen.
5. Hajer, M. A. 1995. *The politics of environmental discourse: Ecological modernisation and the policy process*. Oxford: Clarendon.
6. Melissa Leach, Robin Mearns, and Ian Scoones. 1997. *Environmental entitlements: a framework for understanding the institutional dynamics of environmental change*. Brighton, Sussex: Institute of Development Studies.
7. Mehta, Lyla, Melissa Leach, Peter Newell, Ian Scoones, K. Sivaramakrishnan, and Sally-Anne Way. 1999. *Exploring understandings of institutions and uncertainty: New directions in natural resource management*. Brighton, Sussex: Institute of Development Studies.
8. Peet, R., and M. Watts, eds. 1996. *Liberation Ecologies: Environment, development and social movements*. London: Routledge.
9. Roe, Emery M. 1991. Development narratives, or making the best of blueprint development. *World Development* 19, no. 4.
10. Wisborg, Poul. 2000. Field notes: Visit to Pella and Leliefontein communal reserves, 13 - 15 October 2000.

ⁱ The work is part of a PhD research project on 'Human rights and land reform in South Africa: A case study of policy, discourses and stakeholders'. Namaqualand is one of six districts in Northern Cape Province. It covers an area of about 48,000 km² and has a population of about 77,000, of which a majority (81%) are 'coloured' people of mixed Khoisan descent. Six "Coloured Rural Reserves" make up about twenty seven percent of the area, or 1.2 million hectares. About 400 commercial farmers, almost exclusively 'white', own about half the land at an average farm size of 11,650 ha, while more than four times as many 'coloured' households (about 1,750) use the communal land. The Namaqualand reserves were created as per "Tickets of Occupation" or

'Certificates of Reservation' issued in the 19th and 20th century, further defined in the Mission Stations and Communal Reserves Act in 1909, and made part of the legal apartheid structure through the Coloured Rural Areas Act of 1963, amended as per Act 9, 1987. Current legal reform is expressed in the Transformation of Certain Rural Areas Act 94 of 1998.