



**Sa xu-i ge a sa (What is Yours is Yours)**

*Khoe-khoe Gowab – Damara>Nama - Saying*

**Popular Perceptions of  
Political Institutions in Namibia**

**Heike Becker  
Peik Bruhns  
Centre for Applied Social Sciences (CASS)  
University of Namibia (UNAM)**

A report on 24 focus group discussions  
for the National Democratic Institute for  
International Affairs (NDI)

*Windhoek, Namibia*

*September 1998*

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focus group study, however, we found the vivid complaints to this regard being largely

confined to the Otjozondjupa and Kunene regions. In these two regions we also found both male and female participants who complained that democracy was disruptive to 'traditional' gender relations in their culture.

The fault lies with excess rights. The faults lie with the leaders because they don't explain things.

(Anamulenge resident, female)

Democracy has brought problems for the people because they do not understand. One of the democrats may just walk in here and take our cool drinks. This is his democracy. Freedom and rights. These rights are misunderstood alongside freedom, and this is why silly things like this can happen. The suggestion is that explanations as to restrictions on the exercise and enjoyment of rights are needed so that others' rights are also protected.

(Ongwediva resident, professional)

Each person can lead his/her life the way he/she wants. Democracy means people can use drugs and cause chaos and rape. These things happen when we misunderstand democracy.

(Usakos resident, under 40, male)

Democracy has brought nothing good. Today our children are undisciplined and do not respect their parents. When we were growing up we behaved like children who have parents. When the parent said, no, we knew our father did not want us to do this. Today children have the saying that goes, 'it is my right and whoever may spank me I shall report to the government'. Today our kids are like wild animals.

(Ombujovakuru resident, female)

The one thing I don't like about democracy is when they say that men and women are equal in the eyes of the law. A man cannot even shout at a woman at his own place because the woman will go to the police.

(Epupa resident, peasant, male)

## Mood and Background

forth ways in which they felt the electorate contributed to governing the country apart from voting. They mentioned particularly the payment of tax and the control of government spending, such as “keeping an eye on the cars of the government” (Katutura resident, female). If the electorate did not contribute its share to the running of public affairs, the government’s efforts might remain futile.

<p>We the people of Namibia are the government.</p> <p>(Katutura resident, female)</p> <p>We are the government. The community provides for the government and it is the government.</p> <p>(Otjiwarongo resident, unskilled, male)</p> <p>The government is the people. But you cannot find someone and call him the government. Those who run schools do it on behalf of the government, the people. Those who sit on councils do it for the government, the people. They are only employees. They represent the people. They solve the problems for the people.</p> <p>(Ongwediva resident, self-employed)</p> <p>We put leaders in positions to work for us but they are not the government. I am the government. The leaders are like people driving cars on the owner’s behalf, but the car still remains the other person’s [property]. Thus, the government is ourselves.</p> <p>(Opuwo resident, female)</p> <p>We should also give our best to help the government to make a success of things. Otherwise we will just fall back again.</p> <p>(Katutura resident, male)</p>
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However, only very few focus groups expressed unanimous feelings about who constitutes the government. Most groups across the country came up with ambiguous views. Although those Namibians who avowed that they themselves were the government were in the majority, a substantial minority said the government was made up of political office bearers alone. Different perceptions emerged as to whom exactly the government consists of. To some, only the President, the Prime Minister and the Cabinet members are government, while others also thought of Members of Parliament, including the National Council, as well as regional and local Councillors. How this alternative perception of ‘who is the government’ relates to perceptions of democracy is difficult to conclude, but

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## Sa xu-i ge a sa (What is Yours is Yours)

at least one statement presented a stark image of alienation, where hostile big buildings in the capital city are seen as the embodiment of the government.

Ministers, President and Prime Minister [are the government]. Even if we work for the government, we are not really the government.

(Walvis Bay resident, female)

If we talk about government we are talking about the leaders of the country. Those people in Parliament who are responsible for the nation, and also those in Ministries who are responsible for grassroots.

(Usakos resident, under 40, female)

The government is big buildings in Windhoek that we cannot reach, and people we cannot talk to. If you want a passport you have to wait for months. It's the same thing with an ID. This is government, things that you need that Windhoek decides over and does not help you with.

(Mariental resident, professional, male)

## Feelings about Change

Most respondents felt that much had changed for the better in the Namibian political system since independence. However, feelings about change in Namibian society were far more ambivalent. All over the country people complained that changes were too few, too slow, and in some sectors the situation had even deteriorated over the past eight years.

Many concerns were raised with respect to the relations of black and white Namibians, especially in southern Namibia. Residents of the Hardap region over and over again complained that "in the small towns the white man is still ruling." They felt that white Namibians refused to co-operate, and even communicate, with their black compatriots, and finally that local white business people were not prepared to contribute to the development of the region (all focus groups in Mariental and Hoachanas). On the other hand, a group of white, male Windhoek residents of the suburb of Suiderhof feared that affirmative action would result in a deterioration of the country's infrastructure and administration.

## Mood and Background

While the residents of the South felt that white supremacy continued almost unabated, many participants in the Kunene and Otjozondjupa regions, and also some Marientalers, as well as Windhoek residents of both Suiderhof and Katutura, felt that the former white domination had been replaced by the dominance of Oshiwambo-speaking Namibians in the public employment and education sectors. They particularly claimed that vacancies in the public sector were at times filled with people who had „the right surname“, and bursaries for tertiary studies allocated in line with the same criterion.

The residents of Katutura and the rural Omusati region indeed appeared to be the most happy with the development of the infrastructure in their areas, such as the tarring of roads, street lighting, establishment of new clinics and schools, electrification and water supply. The residents of rural and urban Kunene, on the other hand, complained that they were left out of such developments, while those of Otjozondjupa even claimed that the facilities in their area had deteriorated since independence. Some of these perceptions appear to be rather unfounded, such as the claim that water pumps had been removed from rural Otjozondjupa in order to “be taken to Owamboland“ (Ombujovakuru resident, female). However, the consistency of related complaints indicates an authentic tendency, which may affect the political perceptions of residents of the regions in question.

The 1996 focus group study revealed a very serious concern Namibians had about the increase in crime, an inefficient police force and lenient bail conditions. While in a few locations participants still raised related issues during the 1998 focus group discussions, crime did not come up as a dominant issue during this year’s research. This may serve as an indicator that Namibians have got used to a high level of crime. However, it may as well simply be due to individual perceptions of participants, or a slight improvement may indeed have occurred in some areas.

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## Sa xu-i ge a sa (What is Yours is Yours)

know the procedures of the law-making process. Secondly, people wanted to hear more about the actual debates in Parliament.

Residents of urban areas appeared to be largely satisfied with their access to information. They generally reported that they read about parliamentary debates in the newspapers, watched the Parliamentary Report on TV, and also listened to radio programmes. Participants of focus groups held in rural areas, on the other hand, generally complained about a lack of information. Newspapers do not reach most rural areas, or only with much delay. Many rural residents do not have access to TV or even if they do most do not understand English. The latter is also true for many urban people, especially the older generation. The only readily accessible sources of information for rural Namibians are the NBC radio programmes in the local languages. However, it became clear during the research that the current state of these programmes leaves much room for improvement. Respondents repeatedly complained that the parliamentary reports in the local languages were insufficient, as they were only short summaries of the parliamentary proceedings.

Having a Parliament is a good thing but we must know what's going on there.

(Opuwo resident, female)

I don't know what a Parliament is but I've been hearing this word since independence. I think the output of the Parliament is supposed to benefit my children and me. But I do not know the Parliament.

(Hoachanas resident, over 40)

You will hear that the bill was passed by the Cabinet. Who are the Cabinet and who are the Parliament? These two terms are not clear enough to the people and they don't know what it means when they have passed the thing in Parliament.

(Otjiwarongo resident, professional)

It is not easy to hear these things. We hear them on radio and television. But some people do not have radios and televisions.

(Usakos resident, under 40, female)

The parliamentary report should also be broadcast in other languages so that the old people can understand it.

(Katutura resident, female)

If Parliament wants to reach the people of Hoachanas, Nama should be the language of communication. That the English language is used on TV is a problem for us.

(Hoachanas resident, under 40)

We hear about the National Assembly over the radio because we don't have TVs and newspapers. Sometimes we hear it from educated people like you who come to visit Epupa.

(Epupa resident, wealthy farmer)

The [Otjiherero] radio throws a few words on this [parliamentary debates]. Then they say time is over and it is now time for music.

(Ombujovakuru resident, male)

[There is a parliamentary report on Radio Nama/Damara] but usually it is a shortened version of the report.

(Hoachanas resident, under 40)

### Roles of the National Assembly and the National Council

The 1996 focus group research concluded that there was a generalised recognition of the differences between the two houses of Parliament. In 1998, however, we found that many respondents were not aware of the two chambers' different roles. Only a minority of the participants from locations across the country could somehow accurately describe the statutory role of the National Assembly as the primary legislative and the National Council's function as the body to review legislation passed by the first house. Instead, many respondents were of the opinion that the second house's primary role was to take up the concerns of the people in the regions and present them to the National Assembly and central government. It must be also noted that in many cases people had no idea whatsoever of the two houses' different functions, or had not even heard that Namibia has a Parliament consisting of two chambers. However, urban residents generally had much more accurate ideas of the two houses' roles than rural Namibians did.

It might indeed be true that in 1996 respondents generally had a better knowledge of the roles of the National Assembly and the National Council because of the then fresh memory of the public row the two houses had over the Married Persons' Equality Bill in early 1996.



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## Sa xu-i ge a sa (What is Yours is Yours)

I think we have two houses because people in the second house come from the regions and are with the people on a daily basis. Those in the National Council can better understand our problems and present them to the others.

(Walvis Bay resident, male)

We need two chambers. During the debate of the gender equality issues the Parliament passed the law as it was but the National Council reviewed it. They went around and talked to the people and the law was amended. This is why we need others to evaluate things.

(Walvis Bay resident, male)

It is very good [to have the National Council]. These leaders have been put there by the people at grassroots level to have the representation on regional level, to identify the problems on grassroots. It is very good because in Namibia we are multi-lingual and multi-cultural.

(Mariental resident, semi-skilled, male)

The first house represents the entire country Namibia and the second house presents the views and problems from the regions. You have regional leaders and each will bring up the problems from their region in the second house. They have discussions and no matter whether they agree amongst each other or not, those will then be taken to the higher level.

(Ombujovakuru resident, female)

The second house mostly takes up issues from the community to decide whether they will deal with them, and whether they may become law or not. ... The issue is first dealt with in the first house and then it is taken to the second house. There it is decided whether it will be accepted or not.

(Otjiwarongo resident, unskilled, male)

In terms of the Constitution the National Council is the body to review whatever has been done by the National Assembly. The members of the National Council are directly accountable to constituencies. Therefore, they should have the power to review. It is a problem that they are inferior to the National Assembly because the National Assembly as such does not have a mandate from the grassroots whereas the National Council has regional mandates from different constituencies.

(Otjiwarongo resident, professional, male)

A substantial number of participants from across the country questioned the use of a second house of Parliament. They felt that a country with a small population such as Namibia did not need two parliamentary chambers. Moreover, a few respondents were of the opinion that it was a waste of money to pay for the upkeep of two houses, and particularly to pay salaries for too many MPs. Some suggested the abolition of the National Council, or alternatively the merging of the two houses, with a reduced number of Parliamentarians. The group of Khomasdal residents, which consisted predominantly of

highly educated professionals, issued a particularly strong call to scrap the National Council that they perceived as incapable.

It is a waste of money. We need only one [house]. They all know how to do it. All these people there are just wasting our money.

(Otjiwarongo resident, professional, female)

For a small country like Namibia this double parliamentary system is totally unnecessary.

(Suiderhof resident, male)

I do not see why there should be a second house. People say it serves to represent the people from the regions, but do people in the second house really know the regions well enough? Many of them do not give feedback to the regions. Therefore, I think this second house is a waste of money.

(Usakos resident, under 40, female)

This National Council must go. They don't even know what they are talking about. They must go. They know nothing. They are sitting having a talk show. There is one house too many.

(Khomasdal resident)

### **Parliament, Central and Regional government and Traditional Leaders**

It appears from many responses given during the focus group research that there is a strong need to explain to Namibians the country's political system, and the role of the different sectors of the state. Many participants from locations across the country had only vague, and often inaccurate, ideas of the respective functions the legislative and executive bodies and the judiciary have to fulfil. Much confusion appears to persist as to the political decision-making process. However, a number of urban residents displayed a more accurate knowledge of the political system.

The existence of regional government was generally appreciated, especially in rural areas, although many respondents had no clear idea of its specific functions. However, regional councillors and governors seem to be regarded as a more accessible, though not very powerful, layer of government. Many participants perceived the real power to be vested with central government and the line ministries' regional representatives.

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## Sa xu-i ge a sa (What is Yours is Yours)

recent parliamentary sessions, but should also invite and enable the members of the community to give input into bills currently under debate in Parliament.

- ❑ Parliamentarians should play an active part in voter (civic) education during visits to their constituencies. They should make time to explain to the community the general duties and functions of Parliament, and the specific roles and responsibilities of the two houses. Voter education can take place in specifically arranged community meetings, during visits to schools, development projects and private businesses, after church services, hearings of traditional courts, at markets, cuca shops, and at any other place where members of the community come together.
- ❑ Political parties should also take up an active role in voter education, not only restricted to the times of electoral campaigns. The public funds allocated to political parties could partly be used to develop material on the roles of Parliament in particular, and the political system in general.
- ❑ Civic education in the country's schools needs to be strengthened through the development of appropriate material, teacher training, and revision of school curricula at different levels, where necessary. Voter education should also play a prominent role in non-formal adult education programmes, such as literacy programmes.
- ❑ The media, and particularly the NBC's language services, should provide space for voter and civic education programmes on a regular basis, not just when the next elections are just around the corner. Programmes can be produced in co-operation of the NBC, the Directorate of Elections, Parliament, political parties and Namibian non-governmental organisations with support by international organisations, such as NDI.

- ❑ The format of the current parliamentary reports on NBC TV and the various radio services should be revisited to develop the best possible means to satisfy the public's desire for comprehensive information. The NBC could also consider broadcasting actual Parliamentary debates if topics of generally acknowledged relevance are being discussed

This section's recommendations have been made on the basis of the information gathered during the focus group research. In order to develop adequate educational and outreach programmes, further and more specific research on information needs is recommended.

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What is the role of traditional leaders in present-day Namibia?  
Are traditional leaders part of the (Namibian) government? Why or why not?  
Do we still need traditional leaders in present-day Namibia?  
If you have a problem would you take it to a traditional leader rather than to a government official? Why or why not? Does it depend on the kind of problem?

### **V. Parliament**

How do you feel about Parliament?

What does Parliament do?

What is the job description of a Member of Parliament?  
Are there different houses (parts) of Parliament?  
What do you call these different parts?  
What is/are the differences between the houses of Parliament?  
Why are there different houses of Parliament? Is this good?

Can parliamentarians help you with your problems in your community? Why or why not?  
How?

Have you ever met a Member of Parliament? When and where?  
Do you know who represents your region in the National Council?  
Do you sometimes meet your National Councillors?  
Do they ever come to your community? When?  
Would you take your problems to them? Why? What kind of problems?

How do you hear something about Parliament (radio, friends, co-workers, traditional leaders, newspapers, television)?

What do you hear about Parliament?  
What was the last thing you heard?  
Do you like what you hear about Parliament? Why or why not?

### **VI. Statements on Controversial (perhaps use Topical) Issues**

During the last general elections, SWAPO won a two-thirds majority in Parliament and can make most decisions on its own. Some people say this is a good thing because decision-making is easier if one party has all the power to make decision for the people?

Do you agree or disagree? Why?  
Would it be good if there was only one political party in Namibia? Why or why not?  
What would be good/bad about a one-party state?

The Namibian Constitution says that the President may only serve two terms in office. Some people think that President Nujoma has been doing such a good job that the Constitution should be changed so that he can serve a third term.

How do you feel about that?  
Do you agree/disagree that the Constitution be change for a third term for President Nujoma? Why?

Some people say it is a waste of money that we have elections time and again. They say we had elections when Namibia became independent and that is enough. There is no need that we should have elections again.

Do you agree/disagree that we should have elections only once? Why

## VII. Ethics

Some People say that it is wrong that Members of Parliament and the government receive big salaries

How do you feel about that? Do you agree/disagree? Why?

Some people say parliamentarians and government officials deserve big salaries and nice cars because they are working hard for the country and leaders must be respected

How do you feel about that? Do you agree/disagree? Why?

Should a parliamentarian or government official be given a 4x4 plus an additional car? Why or why not?

Sometimes people say government officials have enriched themselves, like in the Single Quarters case that is currently on trial. Some people say it is wrong when government officials who know about such cases involving their colleagues tell the police or the media

How do you feel about that? Do you agree/disagree? Why?

Is it disloyal if a government official tells about such things going on in the ministry at which he or she works? Why or why not?

Do you know about the self-enrichment officials/civil servants/police officers in your community? What has happened to these people?

Do you think that there are cases where officials are enriching themselves?

Some people in high position prefer to give jobs to their relatives and friends, or people from their village, traditional community or region. Some people say this is right. You have to look first after those close to you.

How do you feel about that? Do you agree/disagree? Why?

Are such things happening in your community? Give examples.

Do such things happen often?

## VII. Questions and Messages

After all those questions that we have asked you, you may now ask us anything you may want to know about Parliament and government. Perhaps you also have a message for the government and Parliament.

## **How Do Namibians Feel About the Country Eight Years After Independence?**

## **What Are Their Attitudes Towards Demo- cratic Participation?**

## **How Do People in Namibia Perceive Parlia- ment?**

From February to April 1998, 24 focus group discussions were conducted across Namibia. At these events small groups of Namibians were brought together to discuss their perceptions about the country and its democratic institutions – particularly Parliament. This study builds upon similar research commissioned by the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI) in 1996. Heike Becker and Peik Bruhns for the Centre for Applied Social Sciences (CASS) at the University of Namibia (UNAM) carried out this study. Funding for the research was provided by NDI under a grant from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The study was conducted as part of a program being carried out in partnership with the Namibian Parliament to strengthen the country's legislative institutions.

**ISBN 99916-760-0-7**

