



**NATIONAL
DEMOCRATIC
INSTITUTE**

FOR INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

**Reports on Focus Group Research in
Namibia:
Popular Perceptions of Political Institutions**

Conducted March and April 1996

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REPORTS ON FOCUS GROUP RESEARCH IN NAMIBIA

Popular Perceptions of Political Institution

National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI)

printed October 1996

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The National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI) was established in 1983. By working with political parties, civic organisations, parliaments, and other institutions, NDI seeks to promote, maintain, and strengthen democratic institutions in new and emerging democracies. NDI has supported the development of democratic institutions in more than 60 new and emerging democracies. Programs focus on six major areas: political party training, election processes, legislative development, local government, civic organisation, and civil-military relations. The Institute is head quartered in Washington, D.C., and has a staff of 175 with field offices in Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean, the Middle East, and the former Soviet Union and the Baltic States.

In August 1995, the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI) began a three-year United States Agency for International Development (USAID) funded program to assist local efforts to strengthen legislative institutions in Namibia. The objectives of NDI's program are to support Namibian efforts to:

- open the legislative process to input from citizens;
- improve lines of communication between Members of Parliament and the public;
- promote deliberative and rigorous debate of legislation for public consumption; and
- enhance the accountability, transparency and accessibility of the Parliament.

As part of this program, NDI commissioned a series of 15 focus groups to be conducted around Namibia to assess public perceptions about of democracy and the Parliament. The aim of this research is to provide NDI, Parliamentarians, and Namibian stakeholders with information from the grassroots level to help define NDI's program activities.

NDI worked with Dr. Ben Fuller and Mr. George, researchers from the University of Namibia (UNAM) and with Lake Research, an American survey research firm, to organise and conduct the focus groups. In addition to Dr. Fuller and Mr. Eiseb, NDI would like to thank Ms. Celinda Lake, Ms. Jennifer Sosin and Ms. Andrea Mazie, all of Lake Research, for all their efforts during the focus group research. NDI would like to particularly acknowledge the work of the moderators and transcribers/translators for this project:

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This publication contains two reports on the focus group research. The first report, by Dr. Fuller and Mr. Eiseb, details the conduct and the information collected from the focus groups. It also contains a short section on recommendations for strengthening the Parliament of Namibia. The Lake Research Report provides their perspective on the data collected from the focus groups and again provides recommendations for NDI's program in Namibia.

OMUNUE UMUE KAUTOORA ONA

Otjiherero Saying

YOU NEED FIVE FINGERS TO PICK UP A STICK

Popular Perceptions of Political Institutions in Namibia

George Eiseb and Ben Fuller

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This study presents the results of fifteen focus group discussions that were held throughout Namibia in March and April 1996. The theme of these discussions was perceptions about democratic political institutions, with a focus on Parliament, in Namibia six years after Independence. The results are presented in two sections - Mood and Background, and Perceptions of Parliament.

Generally a positive mood about Namibia was obtained. Respondents appreciated a democratic form of government both for the freedoms it provided and for the process of thorough discussion of the issues that took place between the ruling party and the opposition. The need for a strong opposition in a democratic system was appreciated. Respondents did have certain concerns about Namibian society that may affect their participation in and perception of Namibia's democratic structures in the future. These concerns, however, did not yet appear strong enough to discourage participation.

Perceptions of Parliament were also generally positive. There is a general understanding of the nature and roles of both Houses. A general feeling that there could be more effective communication through existing structures such as the Regional Councils, National Council, the National Assembly and the Government was uncovered. A widespread desire for more communication between Parliament and communities in the Regions was expressed.

Recommendations on how to best increase this communication include:

- More frequent meetings between MPs and citizens in all areas of the country;
- More effective means of communicating Parliamentary debates including live transmission of the debates themselves;
- Better education on the role and nature of all governmental structures in Namibia.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. Purpose and Scope of the Study	5
1.1 Purpose of the Study	5
1.2 Use and Selection of Focus Groups	5
1.3 Location of Focus Groups	5
2. Mood and Background	9
2.1 Introduction	9
2.2 General Outlook of Participants	9
2.3 Feelings about Democracy	10
2.4 Feelings about Change	12
2.4.1 Economic and Educational Opportunity	12
2.4.2 Crime and Discipline	13
2.5 Attitudes Towards Democratic Participation	14
3. Perceptions of Parliament	15
3.1 Introduction	15
3.2 The Need for Contact and Information	15
3.2.1 Participation	15
3.2.2 Hunger for Information	16
3.3 The Roles of the National Assembly and the National Council	17
3.4 Parliament, the Regional Councils, and Traditional Leaders	17
4. Summary	19
5. Recommendations	21

1. PURPOSE AND SCOPE OF THE STUDY

1.1 Purpose of the Study

In early 1996, as part of a USAID funded programme to strengthen the Namibian Parliament, the National Democratic Institute commissioned two Namibian researchers, George Eiseb and Ben Fuller, to carry out a study on attitudes of Namibians toward Parliament. Results from this study will be used to provide a "people's perspective" on efforts by political leaders to improve the transparency, efficiency accountability of Namibia's legislative structures.

Namibia has been independent for six years. The Constitution, adopted in 1990 after a United Nations supervised plebiscite in November 1989, established a democratic form of government in the former colony of South Africa. The Constitution extended for the first time equal political and social rights to all Namibians. Since then, there have been two national elections; one in 1992 to elect Regional Governments, and one in 1995 to elect the National Assembly and the State President. This study concentrates on the attitudes of Namibians toward their new political institutions and towards democracy as a form of government.

1.2 Use and Selection of Focus Groups

Information for this study was collected using focus group discussions. A focus group is an extended discussion between members of the public about specific issues. Focus groups usually have a moderator who introduces specific topics and who guides the discussion. This type of data collection differs from survey research in that the questions are open-ended, and respondents are encouraged to state their opinions. Focus groups have the advantage of eliciting complex responses from informants, and are often used to help define major issues that can later be more accurately measured through the use of questionnaires and in-depth interviews. Focus groups are limited in that they produce data that is highly subjective and difficult to interpret. In this light this study should be seen as an initial, and not a definitive, measurement of attitudes of Namibians towards their society, political institutions and the democratic process since Independence.

1.3 Location of Focus Groups

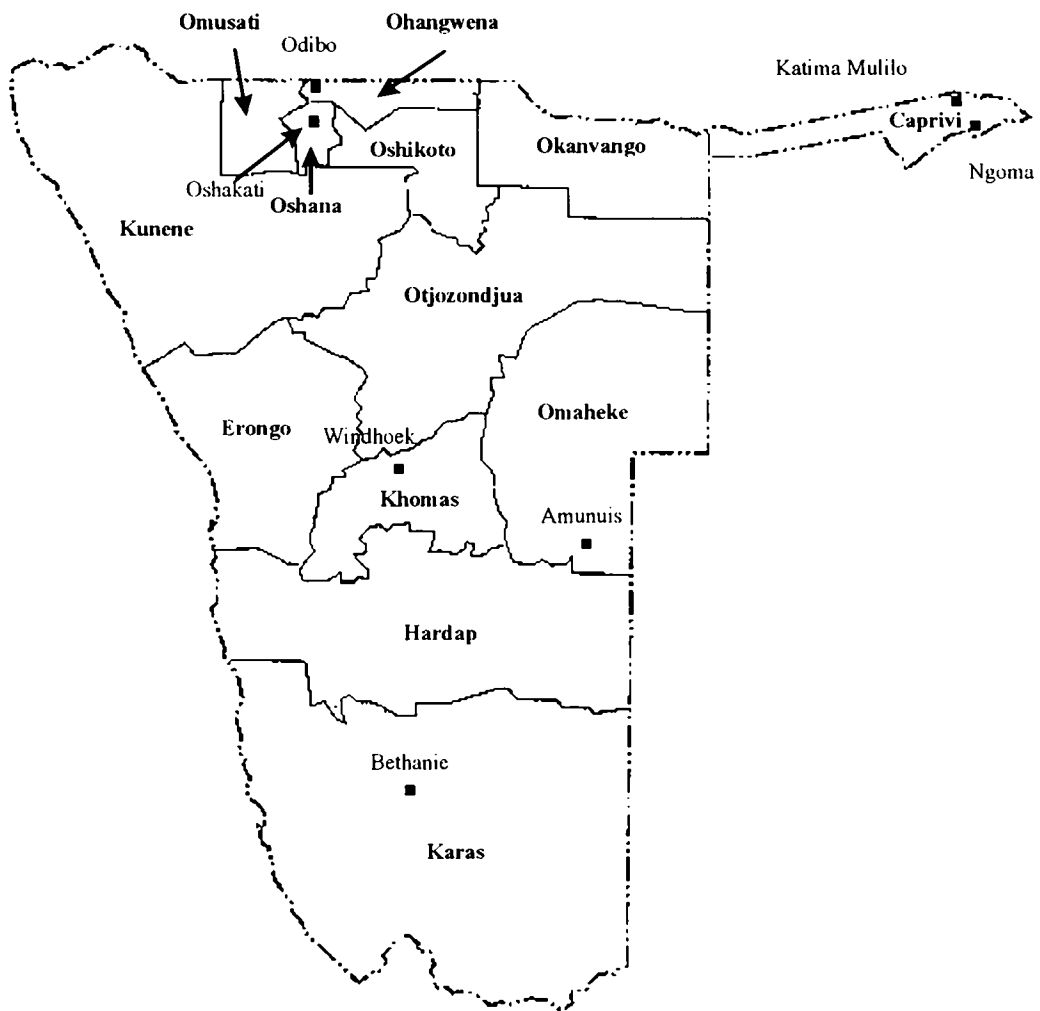
Fifteen focus groups were held in March and April of 1996 in six Regions of the country: Caprivi, Karas, Khomas, Ohangwena, Omaheke, and Oshana. An attempt was made to broaden the demographic spread of the focus groups by selecting homogeneous groups according to a mixture of the following criteria - age, gender type of employment, education, and rural or urban dwellers. If possible, groups were constituted of members sharing the same set of characteristics. In other words, men with primary school education who were rural farmers, or women with secondary school education who worked in a profession, etc. Selecting participants from similar backgrounds ensures a more open discussion, and enables comparisons between groups. It was not always possible to achieve this ideal. In some communities there were not enough individuals to meet a

required criteria (age for example). In other communities it was not possible to segregate groups according to gender. A high percentage of teachers were surveyed in rural areas. This bias arises from the fact that in rural areas, teachers represent the largest group of people with a professional qualification. Table 1 provides a breakdown for the composition of the different groups.

Table 1. Composition of Focus Groups

Site	Gender	Age	Education	Occupation
Aminuis I	F	25 - 40	Primary	Labourer
Aminuis II	M	25-50	Tertiary	Professional
Bethanie I	M	40+	Primary	Labourer
Bethanie II	F	25 -40	Primary	Labourer
Katima Mulilo	M	25 -40	Tertiary	Professional
Khomasdai	Mix	25 -40	Mixed	Mixed
Ngoma	Mix	40+	Primary	Labourer
Odibo I	F	25 - 40	Tertiary	Professional
Odibo II	M	40+	Primary	Labourer
Oshakati I	F	40+	Primary	Labourer
Oshakati II	M	25 - 40	Tertiary	Professional
Katutura	F	25 - 40	Tertiary	Professional
Windhoek I	Mix	40+	Tertiary	Professional
Windhoek II	Mix	25 - 40	Tertiary	Professional
Windhoek III	M	25 - 40	Primary	Unemployed

Map 1. Location of Focus Groups



Note:

Names in bold text are the 13 Regions of Namibia

Names in normal text are the sites of the focus groups

Katutura and Khomasdal are suburbs of Windhoek and not shown on this map.

2. MOOD AND BACKGROUND

2.1 Introduction

In this section an analysis of the general mood and background on attitudes towards Namibia's political institutions is presented. Different sections examine the general outlook of participants toward Namibia since Independence. These sections include: feelings about democracy, feelings about the changes that have taken place since Independence, and lastly feelings about continued participation in the democratic process. The mood of Namibians towards their new democratic system of government is largely positive. Almost all participants were able to point to aspects of their lives that are better under democratic rule. There are indications that people have concerns about certain directions Namibian society has (or has failed) to take since independence. These concerns, however, were not enough to outweigh respondent's views toward their continued participation in the political process, though this may not be the case in the future.

2.2 General Outlook of Participants

Many Namibians continue to harbour good feelings about the country 6 years after Independence. These attitudes were expressed across the country in all different age, occupation and gender groups. Six years is long enough for the euphoria from the end to colonial rule to wear off, hence it is safe to assume that these attitudes have a certain staying power. Interestingly, many respondents who spoke positively about today, compared their lives now to their lives under apartheid. The age groups that were selected for this study (25 - 40 and 40+) are old enough to have both experienced and understood the inequalities of apartheid. If the study had selected younger age cohorts, say 15 to 18 years old who have spent a proportionally longer part of their lives living in a democratic society, the process of comparison to the past may have been different.

Respondents regularly qualified a positive comment about the situation today with concerns on aspects of contemporary life that the speaker found negative. Some of these concerns, as will be seen in section 2.4.1, may partially flow from the enshrinement of individual rights in the Constitution. Other concerns clearly dealt with issues - economic development, educational policy, unemployment that should be of major concern to anyone interested in fostering participation by Namibian citizens in democracy.

The one major exception to this pattern was the group in Ngoma in the far eastern Caprivi Region. This community appears to have benefited little from Independence. Respondents spoke bitterly of the isolation they feel from the government in Windhoek. One reason for this isolation is the sheer distance between Ngoma and Windhoek; Johannesburg is closer to Ngoma than Windhoek. Another reason may be the failure by the government to implement social services such as education and health effectively in a place that is so remote. A third factor could be the lack of indigenous language radio services in Ngoma. Such services are a key method of bringing information to Namibia's rural population. The research team was unable to ascertain if either social services, or the National or Silozi radio broadcasts were available in Ngoma.

2.3 Feelings about Democracy

Enthusiasm for democracy is prevalent. Aside from mere comparisons to an oppressive past, respondents singled out a number of positive reasons to prefer this system of government. Democracy was perceived as good because it allows for a wide discussion of issues before decisions are made. In one group, Aminuis men, there was some concern expressed over the ability of the majority to impose its will on the minority. This aspect of democracy may conflict with some local traditions where decisions are made on the basis of consensus, and not on the basis of majority rule.

Box 1. Participants General Comments

I am free, I have freedom to go where I want in my country. Which differs from the oppression I endured for the almost 45 years as old as I am.

- Aminuis man

I was also glad that Namibia has freedom. We have privileges now which we did not have before. And, we are hoping that the government will create opportunities for us.

- Bethanic Woman

I also say thank you for freedom. we are not using the freedom correctly. We are breaking down instead of building up. We are not standing together.

- Bethanic woman

Namibia is free, but now that it is free we have a lot of gangsters and criminals. It is free but the youth are robbing us of our pension money.

- Odibo man

Nothing has changed. We are still suffering.

- Ngoma respondent

In the case of us who are just sitting at home we do not appreciate the independence because they don't assist us by giving us loans for farming. The agricultural ministry which was assisting has also stopped so we are now just suffering.

- Ngoma respondent

There was a widespread belief in the necessity of a strong opposition. A strong opposition was seen as providing the impetus for these discussions, or as one respondent stated "checks and balances" on the power of the ruling party. Surprisingly, the necessity of a strong opposition was expressed in all the groups that took place in Namibia's North (Oshakati, Odibo), where support for the ruling party SWAPO is virtually axiomatic. The widespread nature of this opinion indicates that many Namibians want democracy to work. When questioned as to the current state of party balances, where the ruling party has an over 75 percent majority, and the collective opposition parties share the rest, a number of respondents indicated that the current opposition bore most of the responsibility for its weak position in Parliament, and not the ruling party.

The focus groups elicited considerable pride in Namibia's Constitution. Respondents noted that changes to the document should be made with caution. For example, when people were asked if the Constitution should be changed to allow for more

than two terms for the State President (an issue that has been discussed in the media recently), there was usually a person, or cluster of people, in the groups who said yes. But, they would be rebutted by other members who stated that the Constitution was not a document to change lightly. An exception, again, was Ngoma, where members of the focus group expressed universal support for changing the Constitution to allow for more than two terms for the State President.

Box 2. Participants Comments about Democracy

We rule/govern ourselves.

- Ngoma respondent

In my own view, democracy is the freedom of body and heart.

- Oshakati man

Freedom of speech, movement.

- Katutura woman

Freedom, equal rights.

- Khomasdal man

I think it is not possible that one party can get more votes because it will oppress the other one. I fear it because if only one party rules it will just do whatever it feels like doing and the other one will have no power in the end you will be ruling and the rule of dictatorship.

- Katima man

It's both good there should be an opposition party so they can argue over issue.

- Bethanic woman

That is the way checks and balances are very important structures and are missing in a one-party state; there is no evaluation or penalisation of the ruling party.

- Aminuis man

Can the small number of opposition members in Parliament be ascribed to the fact that they were less organised, or is it because their performance was not liked by the electorate?

- Odibo woman

... The people were not happy with their performance and subsequently did not vote for them, but voted for another party.

- Odibo woman

.... But as Namibians we must be honest with ourselves, we don't need to change the Constitution, it should stay as it is.

- Odibo man

...The Constitution is the supreme law of the country and if we change it like that we will end up with a policy not a document.

-Aminuis man

2.4 Feelings about Change

A number of issues tempered respondents' enthusiasm for the current state of affairs. Unemployment was primary with the lack of jobs perceived as a problem both for the present and for the coming generation. Associated with this issue was education. Education was seen as a necessary prerequisite to obtaining a decent job. Some respondents, however, were concerned over changes in educational policy that seemed to limit educational opportunities for their children. Crime and the lack of discipline were regularly mentioned. A number of respondents from across the country were still concerned about the illegality of beating children.

2.4.1 Economic and Educational Opportunity

Economic opportunity is the major area of disappointment. While few expected that jobs would be given to them, the failure of large scale job creation, especially for the young, is a bitter pill to swallow. Education was seen as a necessity to getting a good paying job. Two major concerns, however, were expressed. One was the fact that students who are too old or who fail Grade 10 are not allowed to continue in school. Instead, these young people must take evening classes to continue their studies if they chose to do so. Respondents felt that this approach was too haphazard, and that being able to stay in school provided a more reliable opportunity for young people to continue studies. A second concern was the lack of opportunities for students who passed Grade 12. Neither jobs nor tertiary education was available for many successful Grade 12 graduates, and this failure was seen as contributing to crime as young people took to stealing out of boredom and/or economic necessity. A dire opinion was expressed that the failure to provide opportunities for school leavers would frustrate both parents and students about the need to stay in school, and that this would lead to a decline in school attendance.

Box 3. Participants Comments on Economic and Educational Opportunities

I would say schools are up to standard but, what is the use of educating two thousand people. At the end of a year half will study further and half will look for work, when there are only two hundred jobs?

- Khomasdal man

Education is not everything. You must have the will to achieve. This is lacking among the youth. The older generations have learnt through experience that they must stand up and do something.

- Khomasdal man

Unemployment is our biggest problem because students complete their secondary education and they are not employed, neither do they get places in colleges and universities. As number increases they will just turn into criminals.

- Katima man

If I don't get a job until my children reach the age of schooling, how will I pay for their school?

- Unemployed Windhoek man

We are crowded. There are no areas for grazing. People are many.

- Odibo man

2.4.2 Crime and Discipline

Every group mentioned crime as a major problem that has become worse since Independence. Failures by the Police, coddling of criminals, the inability to impose discipline on children and the lack of employment were cited as the major reasons for the increase of crime. Complaints about police efficiency were numerous. These centred on the failure of police to arrest criminals, or to even turn up when a crime has been reported. Some respondents wished for a “stronger police force,” like “back in the colonial days.” Once criminals were caught, respondents noted that they often paid their bail, and were back in their communities within a few days. Some respondents also spoke of lenient sentencing of criminals once they were convicted.

Many complaints were issued about indiscipline in children and young people, who expressed their “freedom” by going to discos and bottle stores. Respondents stated that the prime cause for this “indiscipline” was the fact that beatings by either parents, school teachers, or the Police were made illegal after Independence. Other surveys have come across the issue of beating children as a form of discipline, and the widespread dissatisfaction with the decision to outlaw the practice. Lastly, the link between unemployment and crime was already expressed. It was reiterated here by many respondents as a prime reason for their perceptions of an increasing crime rate.

Box 4. Participants Comments on Crime and Discipline

After independence the use of alcohol by young people has increased at an alarming rate, but in the past people were allowed to drink when they were married, but this time you will even find Grade 7 pupils drinking. Guidance is lacking because the parents have no right to apply corporal punishment to their kids, that is against the law, so they are being spoilt. Girls are found in bars like Liambai. The opening hours of the bars has also influenced these bad habits, previously they use to close early, but now they go up to sunrise. But in the past they use to close at 10h00 the latest being at 12h00.

- Katima Mulilo man

I think the law was abolished too soon. The corporal punishment should have gone on for at least a year after Independence until the children know what is being expected from them and what are their duties.

- Aminuis man

The one thing I think has worsened is the interpretation of rights (long discussion follows). There is consensus on the need to teach responsibilities along with granting rights -- even if it means introducing rights slowly.

- Aminuis man

Let me use the example of children's rights. A child will say "It is my democratic right not to do my homework."

- Katutura woman

The Police Force weakened after Independence. They should get back their power to do their job.

- Bethanie man

2.5 Attitudes toward Democratic Participation

Despite a generalised sense of disappointment about the failure to provide economic opportunities, there is an equally generalised belief that participation in the democratic process is necessary. The overwhelming majority of group participants had voted in all three national elections. A similar plurality of respondents cast scorn upon those who for one reason or another decided not to vote (though the fact that some people don't vote because they either live in very remote settlements and lack transport to polling places, or else they are prevented by their employers from voting, was raised as a concern). The group meetings held in Ngoma and among unemployed men in Windhoek are instructive here. Both groups expressed disappointment over the failure of Independence to bring them any form of development, yet their expressions about the need to participate were very strong. The group of unemployed men from Windhoek, who might be considered disaffected, also had a high rate of voter participation - the only respondent to the question who had not voted was too young to vote - though there was some speculation about the participation of the unemployed in the future if they continue to stay unemployed. The only group that felt strongly about not voting was a group of white respondents, who generally believed that they no longer controlled events in this country.

Box 5. Participants Comments on Participation

The reason that others do not vote is that even if they vote they will see the same thing. According to how I see it those who do not vote are wrong because in case the person you wanted to vote for could have helped the nation. Therefore to refrain from voting is a wrong notion.

- Ngoma respondent

The first time I voted....I will vote again But I think I'm speaking for 99% of Namibians, especially white Namibians. They feel just as helpless as I do when they vote because things are out of our control.

- White respondent

Yes, they have an obligation to vote because if you do not vote no one will know where you stand. People elect leaders in order for there to be order and the rule of law. If people do not vote there will not be any order. Everyone will just do as they wish. Voting is therefore very necessary.

- Odibo woman

3. PERCEPTIONS OF PARLIAMENT

3.1 Introduction

Perceptions of Parliament varied widely. While some respondents were able to accurately describe the functions of the two houses - the National Assembly and the National Council - a larger number were only able to describe them in the briefest of terms.

The fact that Members of Parliament (MPs) from the National Assembly are selected from party rolls, while MPs from the National Council were directly elected, was well known. The groups also indicated that the perception of the National Assembly proposing legislation and forwarding it to the National Council for Review is understood. The major complaint about Parliament centred on the need for more contact with MPs of both houses of Parliament, and for information about the activities and debates within Parliament.

3.2 The Need for Contact and Information

3.2.1 Participation

There is a desire for most people to meet regularly with MPs, and to discuss with them the issues facing both the country and their specific communities. This desire extended to MPs from both the National Council and the National Assembly. MPs from the National Council have more contact with communities in their Regions because they are drawn from specific constituencies. This was an acknowledged fact. Yet, the desire for more contact with MPs from the National Assembly was also expressed. Respondents in some areas stated that the only time they met with MPs from the National Assembly was during election campaigns. They felt that the interval between elections was too long to meet National Assembly MPs. A few respondents indicated that National Assembly MPs at least owed them the courtesy of return visits after local people had voted them into office. In some groups respondents spoke of personal contacts with certain National Assembly MPs. These contacts came either through kinship or friendship - a common phenomenon given Namibia's small population - but, it was noted that these contacts were not systematic enough to provide the kind of interaction desired between the National Assembly and the electorate.

Box 6. Participants Comments on Contact with Parliamentarians

Political parties are active with people....but after they are elected they do not come back and give feedback to the electorate.

- Aminuis man

Nobody is coming here and one does not know where and how to raise your problems.

- Aminuis woman

3.2.2 *Hunger for Information*

The hunger for information about Parliament takes two forms. First, there is a hunger for more factual information about Parliament. This hunger focuses on the nature and roles of the two houses in the parliamentary process, and on the process of how Parliament works. The second hunger is to hear more of the actual debates that take place in Parliament. Rural groups in particular complained about the lack media coverage on parliamentary debates. Newspapers, which reach rural areas both very late and sporadically, were not seen as providing the extended coverage that respondents wanted. The television news, which is not available in many parts of Namibia, was also seen as inadequate. Respondents noted that the news broadcasts only mentioned the highlights of parliamentary sessions. The show Parliamentary Report was criticised, as was a lot of the media, for being only in English, and therefore inaccessible to many rural people. Radio, particularly indigenous language radio, was noted as the best way to reach most parts of the country. Aside from more information about Parliament, there is a desire to actually hear debates as they take place. People did not want a summary, instead they wanted to hear the debates live, or else translated into their own languages.

Box 7. Participants Comments on Hunger for Information about Parliament

We need to be told what the National Assembly is all about.

- Odibo woman

You see that most of us could not give you a definite explanation of Parliament. Maybe the role of parliament should be explained on paper, maybe even in schools. People hear about Parliament, but they don't know definitely.

- Katutura woman

...the media are at fault here. Because those journalists responsible for conveying parliamentary information to Namibians are just plain lazy and don't do it properly.

- Windhoek respondent

We definitely need more information because only those who can read and those who listen to the radio get the information. If you ask people in the villages about Parliament you will see that a lot more needs to be done.

- Odibo woman

Everything which has been said in the National Assembly. We should hear everything, because we are the people who elected them in those positions.

- Ngoma respondent

I think most things were said in English, but it should also be translated to Nama so we could understand. Most of us are listening to the Nama/Damara service they can use it to inform us about issues.

- Bethanie woman

3.3 The Roles of the National Assembly and the National Council

As stated above, there is a generalised recognition of the differences between the two houses of Parliament. The view is that the National Assembly introduces and passes legislation, while the National Council reviews and comments on legislation. This latter perception was enhanced by the recently held hearings on the Married Persons Equality Act which the National Council held throughout the country. In addition, the National Council, because its members are also members of the Regional Councils, was seen as a conduit for channelling local needs to national governmental bodies. This communication, however, may not always be taking place, and may be due to the as yet undeveloped role of Regional Councils within the overall operations of government.

Box 8. Participants Comments on the Roles of the Houses of Parliament

The difference in the two houses is that the one is writing and the other is communicating the laws to the people and taking the complaints of the people to the government. The difference is that the National Council leaders are elected by us in the Region while the National Assembly is being elected from political lists.

- Aminuis man

Before the laws can be approved they first of all go through the National Council. It works hand in hand with the National Assembly but it does not construct any laws.

- Katima Mulilo man

The National Assembly is the head of the legislature. That's where you find the President and the Ministers, while the National Council has councillors like Kandy Nehova. They mostly look at the needs of the people, they get it from the individual regional councillors.

- Odibo woman

The National Council reports the needs of the regions to the Government.

- Odibo man

3.4 Parliament, the Regional Councils, and Traditional Leaders

A number of respondents indicated a sense of a hierarchical relationship between Traditional Leaders, Regional Councils and Parliament, though the relative newness of Namibia's political institutions clouded the issue. Traditional Leaders were seen as having an intimate knowledge of local conditions which they could transmit via either the Regional Councils or the as yet unformed House of Traditional Leaders to the national government. The importance attached to Traditional Leaders may be also be linked to historical experiences.¹ In some parts of the country traditional leaders were imposed by the former colonial regime, and used to enforce policies of social control. In other parts of Namibia, traditional leaders were seen as representing the desire for national liberation.

¹ Ben Fuller and Stephen Turner, *Access to Resources and Rangeland Management Practices in Three Communal Areas in Namibia*, SSD Discussion Paper No. 2, Windhoek, 1996. This paper notes the tenacity with which rural communities continue to cede legitimacy to local traditional leaders over certain areas of their lives despite the tenuous legal position such leaders have had in Namibia since the 1920s.

Regional Councils, because they are still a new form of government in Namibia, are not clearly perceived. Respondents expressed a knowledge that Regional Councils are responsible for development in respective Regions, and that they are linked to the National Council. The mechanisms by which these goals are accomplished, however, are not clearly expressed. This may be due to a number of factors the most important being that the actual day to day functions and capacities of the Regional Councils are still under development.² Another factor related to the recent introduction of the Regional Councils is that knowledge about their functioning in a specific area may be related to the performance of the constituency's Councillor. For example, in Bethanie where the Regional Councillor is also a headman and the Regional Governor, respondents showed a high understanding of Regional Councils. In two groups, Ngoma and Odibo men's groups there was significant confusion about the Regional Councils and local headmen's councils. In Ngoma, respondents noted that the local Councillor was not very active, a factor which definitely contributed to confusion about the Regional and headman's councils.

Box 9. Participants Comments on the Various Levels of Government

Traditional leaders must advise the President on issues of traditional communities. The National Council must take decisions about which laws must be made.

- Khomasdal man

(Chiefs are) people who know the socio-economic condition of their people. They should take these to the Regional Council on behalf of their people.

- Aminuis man

The National Assembly is responsible for the whole country, while the chiefs are responsible only for their tribes and the Regional Council is responsible for taking care of different Regions.

- Katima man

We don't know much how things are at the top leadership. We only want to be taught.

- Aminuis woman

The duties of the Regional Councillor and the duties of a headman are all the same.

- Oshakati man

I don't see a difference. I think they're all the same although the issues might be different.

- Bethanie man

² *National Development Planning and the Regions of Namibia*. National Planning Commission, Research Paper No. 2, Windhoek 1994. This report discusses the various issues and problems regarding the creation and implementation of Regional Councils.

4. SUMMARY

In general, democratic institutions in Namibia are healthy. The need for an opposition to balance the views of the ruling party is established, even in areas where support for the current ruling party is well above 90 percent. There was the widespread view that the Constitution is a basic document that should be altered only after careful deliberation. Namibians have a generally positive outlook towards their country six years after Independence, and are still enthusiastic about the democratic process.

Willingness to participate, however, may be affected by two major issues. The first is the lack of economic development. Worries about the economy are widespread, and may affect people's attitudes toward participation. Economic development is, of course, a matter that depends on a wide range of factors such as reform of the South African Customs Union, drought, the discovery and development of extractive natural resources, the reform of national and local business codes and world wide economic performance. Obviously, some of these factors are beyond the powers of Namibia's Parliament. Indeed, the process of righting the economic wrongs of colonialism is much more complicated and lengthy than is generally appreciated. Despite this problem, however, Parliament can play a pro-active role. Part of the wide-scale discouragement is the perception that leaders and Parliamentarians are out of touch with the needs and concerns of common people. Parliament can negate this by increasing its profile throughout the country.

A second matter of concern is the interlinked issues of discipline and crime. The young are seen as lacking discipline and this is viewed as contributing to a generalised increase in the crime rate. The irony in many of these complaints is that they may result from an extension of democratic rights. The Police no longer have the all-encompassing powers they had under apartheid. They must respect the rights of all individuals, even suspected criminals. As in most democratic societies, merely being arrested for a crime is not the same as being convicted of a crime. Hence, a suspect has the rights to the presumption of innocence, and to the right of bail while awaiting trial. Protection against assault is central to an orderly society, and the removal of the right to assault from parents, school teachers, and the police is essential. The complaints raised on discipline are not frivolous, neither are they the amusing tirades of poor, rural people. Rather they are indicative of the radical changes that have been brought to all levels of Namibian society. Prior to the coming of democracy, Namibian society had undergone decades where brutality and assaults were part of every day life. The complaints raised in the focus groups represent the frustrations of people groping to find and answer to a new way of living together.

Knowledge of Namibia's Parliament is widespread. Most groups were able to distinguish between the two houses, and discern the relative functions of the National Assembly versus the National Council. The National Assembly is perceived as the house where legislation is introduced and where members are drawn from party lists. The perception of the National Council as a conduit for expressing local concerns is strong and is rooted in the knowledge that the National Council consists of representatives elected from specific constituencies. The National Council's role as a body that reviews legislation from the National Assembly is also well understood.

Namibians are eager to know more about their Parliament. They want factual information about the duties and responsibilities of each house. Namibians are also keen to have more face to face meetings with their legislators, especially with those from the National Assembly. Many respondents expressed the desire to hear detailed reports about parliamentary debates, including the debates themselves. Radio, especially indigenous language radio, was mentioned as the favoured medium for reaching rural communities.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

Efforts by legislative leaders to strengthen Namibia's Parliament through increased transparency, efficiency, and accountability can be achieved in a number of ways. Since the aim of this report is to uncover how Parliament is understood and perceived by the electorate, the recommendations which follow will concentrate on this important relationship.

- Regular meetings between MPs of both houses and constituents should become part of the overall legislative agenda. In the National Assembly where, under the formal multiparty system, there is no automatically defined link between constituencies and legislators, a system whereby MPs are assigned to report back to different areas of the country may be advisable. Such assignments could be made on a rotating basis to ensure that National Assembly MPs gain familiarity with the problems and issues facing many Regions of Namibia.
- Communication with the populace has budgetary implications. Funds need to be made available for this purpose. While National Council MPs are tied to constituencies, a common complaint from Regional Councillors is that they lack the funds needed to reach all areas of their respective constituencies on a regular basis, and that this hinders the process of communication. Making funds available for this purpose as well as for the system of report back meetings described in the previous point needs consideration.
- The importance of media relations and outreach needs to be stressed. Parliament should devote some of its information staff to specifically working with the press. These individuals could ensure that media are kept informed of debates, and the status of laws as they move through the legislative process. They could also assist in the production of radio programmes for the different language services. Care would have to be taken with such personnel, however, that their impartiality and lack of partisanship is ensured.
- A programme of education about the different aspects of government in Namibia is recommended. Such a programme should explain the different roles of both Houses of Parliament, the House of Traditional Leaders, the Regional Councils and municipalities. Efforts should be made to integrate this material into different levels of the school curriculum. Given the fact that some of these structures are currently being formed (e.g., the Traditional Leaders House, local conservancy committees, water point committees), or are rather new (e.g., the National Assembly, the National Council, Regional Councils), the material in these education programmes should be revisited regularly to update the manner in which these bodies are evolving in relation to each other.
- The work of a Member of Parliament is not limited to matters on the legislative agenda. Individual MPs have a role to play in addressing the issues that people list as their top concerns: unemployment, crime, indiscipline. The Committee System in Parliament is an appropriate vehicle through which parliamentarians can examine these issues and demonstrate that they share these concerns with the electorate.

- Lastly, Namibia's unique opportunity to entrench democracy needs to be recognised. A clear message from the various focus groups was a level-headed perception of what democracy means, and what it can bring. No one expected a land of milk and honey just because they were able to vote. No one expected jobs to materialise out of thin air just because they now had rights like freedom of speech and equality before the law. Instead, the message of these focus groups is that Namibians understand democracy as a process, and that it is something that needs the participation of everyone to make it work. As one man in Aminuis stated "*The government is you and me, and it is having leaders like Ministers, but the government by itself is you and me.*"

Parliament's role in this process is to ensure that this Namibian, and others like him, have that chance.

LAKE RESEARCH REPORT ON FOCUS GROUP IN NAMIBIA

15 June 1996

Celinda Lake, Jennifer Sosin and Andrea Mazie

Introduction

This report summarises Lake Research's recommendations for steps that could be taken to strengthen Parliament in Namibia. These recommendations are based on our analysis of the focus groups conducted by NDI earlier this year. In addition, Lake Research's role in this project included developing the discussion guides for the focus groups and advising on the methodology and on the training of moderators.

Summary of recommendations

- Communication between parliamentarians and citizens needs to be regular and predictable, not sporadic. For parliamentarians to develop closer direct ties to citizens that effectively strengthen democracy, they need to do more than simply increase their visibility in local communities. Visits from parliamentarians that are cosmetic in purpose or sporadic could backfire, and only increase disappointment and scepticism about the government.
- Communication should include "report-back" procedures. For community visits to be effective, they need to be not only regularised, but representatives need to be prepared to respond to what they hear and to regularly report on progress. In other words, building stronger constituent relations is not for show; it must carry substantive results. Indeed, Namibians already recognise that accountability is key for democracy and is what distinguishes this form of government (or at least should) from more traditional structures.
- Individual parliamentarians should develop regular and personal relationships with communities, so that they are a familiar face and have personal credibility. However, direct constituent relations is most important for members of the National Council, who have a recognised reason for caring about specific regions. For members of the National Assembly, broader communication strategies (e.g., fact finding expeditions, radio broadcasts) are most important.
- A strong voter participation program will be important to sustaining high levels of turnout in the next elections. Many already believe that there is no point to voting, and we would recommend an aggressive voter-participation program around the next elections. Developing norms of participation around accountability will help, although that is difficult without more developed opposition.
- Coalition-building and projects that pool resources have a great opportunity for success. The country's political environment, which combines demand for change with reliance on national government initiatives, could give political representatives an enormous amount of freedom to build coalitions and pool development resources in local communities, using the authority of the national government to drive the process.

- Radio is a critical means of communication, and language service and news broadcasts should be expanded. Not surprisingly, few read newspapers, and even fewer have access to television. Radio language services, as well radio programming that is straightforward news that can be remembered and disseminated by those listening, can clearly have a major impact.
- Civic education about citizens' role in a democracy should be expanded. Currently, few Namibians have a sense of how individual citizens can participate in a democracy (other than voting). Namibia has already been fairly successful in educating its people about the structures of government; the larger and remaining task is strong education about the role of citizens in this government.

The Importance of Regular Communication

Overall, increasing the level of direct communication between parliamentarians and citizens should be the central goal. First, participants in the focus groups expressed a clear and emphatic wish for government officials to visit their communities and listen to their concerns more often. In addition, stronger communication can help reduce the emerging cynicism about government, strengthen Namibians' commitment to democratic ideas, and increase political participation.

Countering Cynicism. More direct and regular communication is critical to holding down the level of cynicism about the government and about political leaders. Already, some participants in the groups expressed considerable cynicism about their government, in part stemming from disappointment. Although the Namibians participating in the focus groups are very pleased to have democracy and can point to many areas of progress, they are also quite clear that the country faces serious problems, and they are sceptical that their government and elected officials doing much to address those problems. This means that, although they have no wish to go backwards, their mood is ambivalent. Simultaneously, they express gratitude for freedom, positive feelings about tangible signs of progress, and great ambivalence that freedom has not brought everything they had hoped. There has been some progress on services like electricity and water, but little progress and in fact some deterioration on big issues like crime and jobs. (Not surprisingly, expressions of progress are more prevalent in the north, while attitudes are more negative in the south. However, except for Ngoma, where participants were overwhelmingly negative, the groups in nearly every regions included both positive and negative respondents.)

The absence of real change is a grave disappointment for many Namibians, and they hold the government accountable. The government, they believed, has broken its promises. "It seems as if politicians have forgotten their promises," said a woman in Katutura. "Parliament has said that the unemployed people will get jobs," said a man in Windhoek, "but up to today nothing has happened. A Bethanie woman agreed: "Promises made were not fulfilled." Particularly among labourers, unemployed Namibians, and in Ngoma, many are much more negative than they are positive, and they believe that nothing much has changed, despite their hopes and despite the promises made them. A successful democracy can benefit from interaction in the creation of more realistic expectations for change.

This disappointment has already translated into cynicism and disillusionment with the government and with government officials. In 15 focus groups, not more than three or four participants could find anything good to say about parliamentarians as a group. Parliamentarians, Namibians believe, are self-aggrandising, getting rich while the people remain poor, seeking only to accumulate more wealth, caring about the people only at election time, then promptly forgetting what they promised. In short, say many, the people who have mainly benefited from independence are politicians, not the people.

This cynicism has two consequences. The first consequence is that people do not believe that parliamentarians listen to their concerns or do anything about them. Parliamentarians rarely visit them to find out what they want, and, even when they do, they don't solve the problem or even return to report on their progress. "All over, people are complaining," said a man in Katima Mulilo, "but no reply is coming from our government." Said a woman in Aminuis: "We are getting tired of giving our views and not getting feedback. Many people did not come because they are fed up of giving views without feedback. It is like we are being used as toys." This feeling is painfully strong in Ngoma, where the focus group participants were very angry about the government.

This is the kind of cynicism that a strong constituent-relations program can help address. Although many Namibians are sceptical that visits from government officials will result in changes, they remain eager and anxious for this to change. Even in Ngoma, despite the anger, people desperately want the government to visit, listen, and respond. "The visits to the regions should be at least five times a year," said a man in Aminuis. "Tell the ministers to visit us always, not only during elections," said the women in Bethanie. "If a parliamentarian comes to us we will be thankful," said a woman in Odibo.

Clearly, visits from parliamentarians would be welcomed. However, to successfully bridge the gap between government and the people, giving people a sense that their input is genuine and that elected officials will respond, parliamentarians need to understand that people will inevitably suspect them of insincerity. **This is one of the reasons we believe that it is important for individual parliamentarians to develop personal and regular relationships with communities, so that they are a familiar face and so that they have personal credibility. Sporadic visits that seem more show than substance will just reinforce the cynical stereotypes that Namibians already have. Visits need to be regular, and parliamentarians need to bring progress reports and evidence that concerns aired at their previous visits have been addressed. Parliamentarians need to develop report back procedures to better notify constituents of what they have done to address constituents' concerns.**

Constituent-relations training is most critical for members of the National Council. Constitutionally, as well as in the context of Namibians' current understanding of their system, facilitating closer ties between National Council members and local constituencies makes more sense than attempting to encourage National Assembly members to develop constituent service programs. Although most Namibians have a sketchy understanding of the specific divisions of power between the two houses of the national Parliament, many do have a clear sense that it is the regional councillors who are responsible for representing local concerns. However, we would also recommend that the National Assembly adopt and develop broader communications strategies, travelling on fact-finding and community hearing expeditions, for example, preferably with local leaders as participants and hosts,

and making radio language services a priority.

Strengthening Democracy. For most Namibians, independence and the advent of democracy has much less to do with a new system of government than with freedom. Indeed, for most, the fundamental definition of "democracy" is "freedom of expression" -- the right to say what they want, to whom they want. This includes the right to criticise SWAPO, as well as the right to stand up to their employers. In addition, "democracy" means equality to many Namibians, which includes freedom of movement and freedom of association. Namibians are acutely aware that they can now live where they want to live and do what they want to do, and the presence of formerly disadvantaged Namibians in positions of economic and political power seems to have more meaning as a symbol of this type of equality than as a symbol of self-governance or control over resources.

What is absent from Namibians' definition of democracy is the idea of participation and self-governance. In this context, voting is exciting and important in part because it allows people to express themselves and register an opinion. As one participant said, voting means that they are free to wear a SWAPO T-shirt but vote for someone else. The notion of self-government seems secondary, and the idea of Namibians being able to participate in government decision-making on a regular basis, in contexts other than elections, is absent.

In short, people have little sense of personal empowerment or involvement with their government. In fact, the focus group participants expressed virtually no sense that they, personally, could influence the government in any way. While they were very pleased to have their opinion sought and expressed strong hopes that their opinions would be considered when delivered in Windhoek, almost none of the participants had stories to tell about approaching government officials pro-actively to register their wishes or complaints or to push for something to be accomplished. When they see parliamentarians in person, it is generally in a social context -- at a funeral or in the marketplace -- and none of the participants mentioned a time when they had approached an MP with an opinion or request for information. In Namibia, citizens wait to be asked for their opinion, and the idea of going out of your way to influence a member of Parliament seems virtually non-existent. It also does not appear that Parliamentarians are encouraging input from the citizens, and thus we see remnants of both more traditional and more authoritarian styles.

This is another reason we believe that it is important to institutionalise mechanisms for constituent relations, and to emphasise regularity. Until people see a formal and expected avenue for registering a point of view outside of elections, it is unlikely that they will easily see ways to take advantage of additional direct contact with parliamentarians.

Increasing Political Participation. One consequence of Namibians' developing cynicism is that many are questioning the value of voting. If politicians' promises are empty, made only to win elections, why should people bother to vote? "We are not going to vote," said a Ngoma man, "because it is of no value." A professional woman in Katutura expressed similar feelings: "You voted for SWAPO and you don't see a change. You vote for the DTA, you don't see a change... At the moment I don't see anything to vote for." Said a man in Aminuis: "You are promised one thing and it does not materialise. That is demoralising and people will refrain from voting." Moreover, Namibians also tend to lump all politicians together. This means that there is already less

energy behind developing an opposition as a way of presenting alternatives. Many of these Namibians do not believe it will matter. While there is no evidence that Namibians are questioning the validity of elections, this does suggest that turnout in the next national elections may be lower, and we would recommend emphasising a strong voter participation program.

Taking Advantage of Opportunities for Problem-Solving

Although Namibians are already cynical about parliamentarians, the faith they have in government's capacity to solve problems also provides Namibian parliamentarians with tremendous opportunities. Indeed, Namibians continue to have very high expectations from government. They have a strong belief that government both could and should solve major problems, and they are not shy at all about placing demands on the government. They believe that the government has the resources and the authority to make major improvements in their lives -- providing jobs, building schools and hospitals, bringing clean water and electricity.

In short, Namibians seem open to development projects of virtually any description, and they want the national government to play a visible and aggressive role in their communities. This suggests that training in coalition-building could be an important piece of any parliamentary training programs, and fostering a close and co-operative relationship between Parliament and NGOs should be a priority. The country's political environment, which combines demand for change with reliance on national government initiatives, could give political representatives an enormous amount of freedom to build coalitions and pool development resources in local communities, using the authority of the national government to drive the process. Nonetheless, while results count, developing expectations through accountability in the political system will be key to keeping this democracy healthy.

Expanding Information and Education.

Namibians are hungry for information about what their government is actually doing, and radio can play a central role in addressing this need. Currently, radio is often a word-of-mouth vehicle -- with just a few people having access to a radio or comfortable in English, and then these few communicating what they learn to others. While many of the focus group participants would prefer being visited in person, radio is clearly the most practical way of disseminating information on a large scale -- if possible, by working towards expanding the language services available in more remote areas. Newspapers rarely penetrate, television has not reached many places, and many are uncomfortable with English, and improving the radio news coverage in local languages should be an immediate goal. In addition, in the larger towns, radio "chat" shows seem to have a real audience, and these shows also appeal to Namibians' appreciation of their new freedoms of speech and expression. If they do not do so already, parliamentarians could establish themselves as regular guests on such shows.

Finally, an important way of making a long-term difference in democratic development in Namibia is to improve the civic education taught in Namibia's schools.

However, we were struck not by how little the participants in the focus groups know, but by how much. In most of the groups, participants had a roughly accurate sense of the structure of their government and the roles of their elected representatives. The piece of civic education most absent, we believe, is an understanding of how individual citizens can participate in a democracy (other than voting). Few in the focus groups expressed any sense of personal efficacy or empowerment -- any sense that ordinary Namibians can influence their government in any way other than voting. Democracy, to most Namibians, equals freedom of expression and a symbolic value; it does not imply as much about practical participation or about how decisions are made. It appears that Namibia has already been fairly successful in educating its people about the structures of government; the larger and remaining task is strong education about the role of citizens in this government.