

Epilogue

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Most of our interactions on the research site took place just prior to the outbreak of Covid-19. A lot has happened in the region since then, opening interesting possibilities for further research. One of the developments is the completion and inauguration of the Neckartal Dam – a construction that began in 2013. The dam is expected to boost agricultural development in the region, with agricultural production planned on about 5,000 hectares of land, focusing on table grapes, dates, lucerne, fruits, vegetables, and other cash crops. The underlying vision of this costly state intervention aims to make the region an agricultural hub, and boost economic development in one of Namibia's marginalised regions. The construction of the dam is accompanied by the simultaneous hope of creating opportunities for tourism, water sports and aquaculture – which will collectively be important for employment creation, the region's economic revival and Namibia's economic growth at large.

Many hail the development of Neckartal Dam. For example, an investment magazine recently stated that:

The story of the Neckartal Dam is also a story of local community development...[The main characteristics of the !Karas Region] is the aridity of its land, barren and without water for most of the year. Now scarcity has been significantly reduced thanks to the Neckartal Dam.¹

The Neckartal Dam mega project joins existing irrigation schemes in the region, particularly those found along the Orange River. Together, these will remain important for job creation, not just for the region but attracting migrant labour from as far as northern Namibia. Irrigation schemes add millions to the national economy, bringing hope, especially in times of economic downturn, which is particularly important with the collapse of other sectors of the economy due to Covid-19 measures. In 2021, for example, it was reported that grapes exports would bring in N\$ 1 billion in revenue.² However, not everyone profits from the booming grape industry, and headlines of despair continue to dominate in the media. Examples of these are: 'Grape crop brings in millions, but farm

1 We Build Value Digital Magazine 2020

2 Freshplaza 2021

workers live a harsh life';³ 'Aussenkehr grape farm works left in limbo';⁴ and 'Bumper harvest expected for Namibia's grapes ... workers still bemoan squalid conditions.'⁵ Collectively, these headlines reflect the long-standing deplorable working and living conditions on the grape farms, which are characterised by makeshift shelters and meagre wages, without any social protection. This fits the overall capitalist agenda, which prioritises profiteering over humanity. Semi-privatised and private companies running irrigated agricultural schemes and mining operations have brought jobs to the region but have not managed to transform or uplift the living standards of the people residing there. It needs to be seen whether the celebrated Neckartal Dam is of the same kind; or whether new modalities can be found to make the hopes around the dam a reality, for the good of the people.

Another important development in the region is the Namibia Diamond Corporation (NAMDEB) extending the diamond mine's lifespan by an additional 20 years – from 2022 to 2042. During our visits to Oranjemund in 2019 and early 2020, uncertainties dominated the landscape as NAMDEB's land-based operations were due to close in late 2022. This situation would have had a serious impact on Namibia's economy, as mining is the largest contributor to the GDP. The potential loss would have been '2,100 direct jobs and many more indirect employments, and also the likely economic collapse of the town of Oranjemund.'⁶ With the extension for a further 22 years, all of this is averted, although fears remain that sub-contracting by NAMDEB will erode the relatively good salaries in the mining sector. Still, the transformation of Oranjemund will continue to provide opportunities to explore how this town can evolve beyond the mining sector. The town's transformation processes have already begun, with the transfer of the town's management from the mine to the government, the start of transitioning socio-economic services – such as education and health – into public services, and the gradual transformation of the economy through diversification and the introduction of new industries beyond mining.

While these developments are progressive, and bring hope to the region, ambiguity regarding the border between Namibia and South Africa remains. Although the Orange River forms the international border between South Africa and Namibia, the precise geographical location thereof has remained an issue of contention for decades. South Africa's decision to move its borders beyond the Orange River into Namibia's drylands have been questioned, particularly by the Namibian members of the National Assembly. Despite promises that the border between the two countries will be moved to the middle of Orange River – leading to the independence of Namibia – up to this day, no formal agreement has been concluded. As a result, the future of those who depend on the resources from the Orange River and its surrounding areas remains uncertain.

While intended to discuss some of the bilateral issues between the two countries, the Namibia-South Africa bi-national commission third session meeting – due to take place from 9–12 April 2022 – has been postponed until further notice. The meeting was meant

3 Smith 2021

4 Tendane 2021

5 New Era 2020

6 Ndjavera 2021

to provide an impetus to further enhance bilateral cooperation, as well as a platform to exchange views on issues of mutual interest and concern at regional and multilateral fora, alongside reviewing cooperation in a wide range of areas – including diplomatic, legal, economic, social, and defence and security concerns.⁷ It is anticipated that when Namibian president Hage Geingob finally meets his South African counterpart, President Cyril Ramaphosa, the Orange River boundary will be an agenda point. The Namibian side, in particular, is eager to initiate discussion around allowing Namibia to be a full riparian partner of water from the river, and the border of the river falling on the deepest middle mark of the river, as per international law.

In addition to these unresolved border issues, the region is also marred by many unresolved historical issues, such as the expropriation and uneven distribution of land under colonial rule, which applies to both the Namibian and South African sides. In central and southern Namibia, in particular, the experience of genocide and strong demands for reparations play an important role in the debates around land and landownership. These open questions, along with the looming challenge of climate change, will continue to dominate the discourse in the region.

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7 Vatileni 2002

