



ECONOMIC & SOCIAL JUSTICE TRUST

Utilisation of Namibia's Bush Biomass:

A chance for a developmental intervention to break colonial trade pattern

Press Statement, 27 January 2021

After broad consultations held over several months regarding the utilisation of bush biomass in Namibia, we wish to publicly raise the key developmental issues at stake such as the possible establishment of value chains, the creation of local jobs and the local generation of energy.

The idea of de-bushing is largely based on the wish to regain grazing areas. Currently about 1.85 million tonnes of bush biomass are utilised for charcoal, fire wood, poles, animal feed, wood chips and wood pellets. Several million more tonnes are available for utilisation.

A steering committee of various public and private stakeholders was established in 2014. It aims to create Biomass Industrial Parks (BIPs) to use the wood biomass sustainably. BIPs are meant to cluster different technologies and value-addition strategies. There is potential for expanded local processing of bush biomass. For example, Namibia could engage in the large-scale production of boards for local housing projects and bush biomass could also be turned into school furniture as was already done successfully during a pilot project some years ago.

The controversial idea of bush biomass export to Germany

A controversial bush biomass export proposal is driven by the German Agency for International Cooperation (GIZ) through the Bush Control and Biomass Utilisation (BCBU) project which is supported by the German Institute for Applied Material Flow Management (IFaS). The GIZ envisages to harvest invader bush in Namibia and to convert it into energy in the German city of Hamburg and in other German cities. This is presented as an environmentally friendly initiative but it would require the transportation of large quantities of bush biomass by road (about 100 km), by rail (about 600 km) and by ship (about 10,000 km).

From a **Namibian perspective**, the export proposal needs to be questioned on various grounds:

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- There is an urgent need for local renewable energy creation as Namibia is currently dependent on energy imports from South Africa. Namibia needs to achieve a far greater level of energy self-sufficiency. NamPower is in the process of establishing the first 40MW Encroacher Bush Power Project outside Tsumeb. More biomass power plants may be set up in future alongside renewable energy projects such as solar.
- Strict ecological requirements are needed to mitigate the risk of large-scale and possibly indiscriminate bush harvesting which could lead to desertification. Only selective bush thinning (not bush clearance) must be allowed but this is extremely difficult to monitor as harvesting will take place over a large geographical area on mostly privately-owned farmland.
- Job creation must be central to bush biomass harvesting. By far the largest number of jobs will be created through semi-mechanised harvesting and local processing including the current initiatives (charcoal, animal feed etc.). In addition, the production of boards and school furniture could result in tens of thousands of new jobs and an accompanying further skills development. Large-scale bush biomass exports, on the other hand, are likely to result in a fully-mechanised harvesting and may destroy a significant number of existing jobs. The proposed biomass harvesting for exports is thus likely to not only create relatively few jobs - similar to the practices of capital-intensive mining operations.

An export agreement that would require the supply of large amounts of biomass for decades may benefit specific interest groups but it does not promote Namibia's developmental objectives of job creation and local value-addition. Such developmental public interests have to be safeguarded by the Namibian government. We therefore urge our government to directly promote local value chains and renewable local energy creation as the best option for Namibia.

The proposed large-scale export of bush biomass to Germany would constitute a continuation of the colonial trading patterns with Africa being relegated to the role of supplier of semi-processed materials. This does not offer a solution to Namibia's developmental challenges and the central aim of local job creation.

Herbert Jauch
Chairperson