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WOMEN AND LAND ISSUES

The second national land conference was supposed to provide a clear path forward on land-related matters, but viewed from a gender perspective much still remains to be done to ensure women have equal access, ownership and control of the land.

When the second national land conference ended in early October 2018, Namibia was still no nearer to resolving its long standing land issues, despite the event having been touted as the platform to answer the land question as best as possible.

Even though the second land conference came out with 24 resolutions, some of these will take years to be implemented and for the effects to become visible.

For all the praise the conference attracted, one of the areas where the five-day event fell short was on the issue of effectively dealing with women's access to land – whether agricultural land or urban residential land.

Women in Namibia have traditionally gotten the short end of the stick with regards to land ownership and use, even though women make up slightly more than half of the country's population.

With over 40% of rural households being headed by women, many observers

and participants were of the opinion that the issue of women's right and access to land should have featured more prominently at the land conference, aside from government making the a "The draft Revised National Resettlement Policy 2018-2027 must be reviewed through broad-based public engagement to eliminate gender and elite bias. The resettlement programme must aim for a 50:50 gender ratio resettlement of beneficiaries. Any future land bill should mainstream gender disparities. Women must be prioritised as immediate beneficiaries of land resettlement programmes, freehold affirmative action financing, and communal land allocation processes to gain gender parity in land access, ownership and control," said Uhuru Dempers of the Namibia Non-governmental Organisations Forum (NANGOF) Trust during the land conference.

This call, and others, was made against the backdrop of women still largely being discriminated against, especially in communal farming areas – with the issue of dispossession also looming large concerning women – when it comes to allocation of land and recognition of women's tenure rights under customary law, with cultural practices in some traditional communal areas being more harmful than in others despite attempts over the years to counter such.

To counter this, over the years government has tried to use the resettlement programme to try and equalise the field.

At the land conference it was revealed that 41% of over 5 000 resettlement beneficiaries to date have been women, according to figures provided by the Ministry of Land Reform.

THE URBAN LAND CONUNDRUM

While discussions of farmland-related issues were dominant, the second land conference hardly recognised that arguably the bigger land question related to

access to urban land across Namibia.

According to census and other figures, in line with a global trend, the Namibian population is fast urbanising.

The migration from rural to urban areas – with many pushed by climate and environmental degradation and lack of opportunities in rural areas – is already putting immense strain on the service delivery abilities of local authorities across the country and one of the areas where this strain is especially evident is in the inability of local authorities to provide enough land fast enough and affordably enough for affordable housing development. This situation has led to the cost of serviced land and housing shooting up and beyond the reach of many, contributing to the fast growth of informal settlements.

"The top-down, costly and lengthy land development processes are limiting the scaling-up of delivering land to the poor. It results in developments that are very costly to the government and local authorities (N\$50 000 to N\$80 000 per fully-serviced erf), and not affordable to the poor. It is also lengthy, and those on the waiting lists and in informal settlements have no idea of when they will obtain their own land, or what the costs would be," said Edith Mbanga of the Shack Dwellers Federation of Namibia at the land conference.

Once again, women are especially affected in this situation as many urban poor households are headed by women.

With access to decent housing being considered essential to improved health and long-term economic outcomes, the land conference was a missed opportunity to really get to grips with the issue of provision of affordable decent housing, by addressing the urban land cost issue decisively.

In light of this, what the land conference has clearly demonstrated once again is that women's voices are still largely sidelined or marginal in such critical discussions, even as women are probably most affected in the end. ♀