**FU2 - Interview farmers union NECFU, Windoek - 20-1-2023**

**Su: Could you please start with a short introduction of yourself, your role here, and also of the organization?**

Oke, my name is [name], I am the executive manager of NECFU. NECFU stands for Namibian Emerging Farmers union. It’s a farmers union that was formed in 2010. To represent farmers that, there are 3 categories of farmers. A) farmers that bought farms under the instrument called ‘affirmative action loan scheme (https://agribank.com.na/post/mr-affirmative-action-loan-scheme) ’, administered by the agricultural bank of Namibia. So those are the previously disadvantaged farmers, before independence they did not have the right to acquire land, due to the Apartheid structure that we had. So black farmers could not acquire fixed property. So after independence, the government introduced an affirmative way, I don’t know how affirmative it was, that those who were meeting certain criteria could acquire and buy land. So that category of farmers is one that we represent. The government has another program, that is called a resettlement program. So anybody can apply to the ministry of agriculture and acquire land. Then they put out, they request an application for farmers to apply to be resettled. But what happens is that any farmer, or any person can request to be resettled on a piece of land. Those farmers we also represent. The other category is just any farmer that feel they associate with our mission and vision and value the services that we offer, they can also join the union. So we represent farmers, mostly with a previously disadvantaged background. Because there is a difference between farmers that have already been in the system. Some of them have inherited these farms from their fathers and grand-grandfathers. But those farmers that are being resettled and are buying land, they have specific needs and they need to be kind of affirmed, before the start to be in the system of production. And that is what NECFU is doing. We do lobby and advocacy, if there are policies at government level that are hindering the productivity related to farmers that we represent. It is our role to go and influence that policy. Services that we like to offer or that is needed by our constituency. Like for instance if there is any information about the findings of your research, it has to be disseminated and shared. We can disseminate information and we are also the same vehicle if there are needs and problems that need to be articulated, we are a mouthpiece for them. We are a very small secretariat, consisting of a complement of 4, that is actually servicing the whole country. We are not a top heavy organization in the country, we do not have a lot of people on board.

**Su: and how many members does NECFU have?**

We are talking about 500 right now. 500 on and off, some of them, we are talking about fully paid members but sometimes they don’t, we have an annual fee, a very small fee to keep the union going, but sometimes they pay, sometimes they don’t pay. We are talking about more or less 500, but we are not exclusive for those that like to, because we are a national union, we are not like, if we have a service, a network for your phone, or if there is information that will benefit farmers, even if they don’t contribute physically or financially, we offer it. You cannot keep the information away from them, it is part of our responsibility.

**Su: And how are these members organized, are they organized in smaller organizations?**

Yes they have these farmers associations are supposed to have regional fractions. So you have 5 associations, they have to have a regional structure and that regions fraction is supposed to be affiliated with the national. In some of the regions it works, some of the regions are more active than others. But that is how it is supposed to be. The farmer belongs to the association, the association to the regional one and the regional is supposed to be represented by the national which is overseen by our office here.

**Su: Oke, but you say it’s supposed to be, so sometimes it is not working like that?**

Yes, I should be very honest, in some cases it works, some farmers are more active than others, some regions are more active than others. It is a voluntary association, so you only get those that want to be active.

**E: For the resettlement program, do the people have the same rights of land once they’re resettled, are they owners of the land?**

The land belongs to the government, they just have the right to use it. If for one or the reason the government feels that you are not productive, or you, they can also take it away. There is a letter that you should sign with certain conditions that you have to meet as a resettlement farmer.

**Si: Oke, so that is almost similar when you are resettled, to being a communal farmer?**

Communal farmer, most of the farmers that are resettled are communal, farmers that don’t have land. Then the categorisation of communal, commercial is you know. It used to be those farmers that farm together, communally, without entitled land. They used to be communal farmers. But it is becoming more irrelevant by the day. We classify them as communal farmers, but in communal areas there are also commercial farmers, farmers that are doing farming on a commercial basis. I am a commercial farmer, I have a piece of land, but there are farmers that are doing much better than myself, that are on a communal land.

**Su: So the main difference is than the land ownership**

Yes, the distinguishing factor here is the ownership and if you are entitled owner. But the guys in the communal areas, if he is farmer better than mine, he is farming commercially. That is actually blurring the whole thing of communal farming. And people think, when we are talking about communal farming, that people farm communally, and they are poor. But there are numerous farmers that are affluent that are farming in communal areas. It has to do with perceptions, that does not meet the reality on the ground. But being a commercial farmer does not mean that they are doing better than the other guys.

**Su: And what type of farmers are they usually? Are they cattle farmers, or horticulture, or different?**

Mix farming, you know, there is cattle, large stock, small stock, meaning there is sheep and goat, and there is poultry, everything.

**Su: And you said that these emerging farmers have some specific needs. So what would you say are those needs?**

Oke, some of us who bought land, we had to put all our resources at stake. We had to pay 10% deposit, my piece of land was 1.8 million, so you need to come up with 180.000. You need to have your starting capital. On top of that you need to start servicing the bank loan. It’s heavy. So as compared to someone who just inherited a piece of land and just start farming. Now they are talking about, it’s a free market system. So you are in competition to produce like the guy who had leverage of all the time. That is one. So you cannot, like for instance, if I buy a property, the property that I buy stands as a collateral for the money that I take out. Meaning that I cannot offer the same property for a loan for input, or running an operational cost, or like in a space that you are talking about. You need certain technologies, if I need to be involved in wood chips supplies. You need to have that machinery. So where do I get that machinery. You are up to here with your debt and you still need to perform to pay the bank loan. And you still have to perform, because you are in business to do business. So you have to do business to earn a living. So the farmers that are tight, are operating from a very tight angle, resource wise. And the other challenge that they also have. A communal farmer is, you farm communally, so your production costs are shared. If you have to buy diesel for a communal water point, then everybody will contribute. In the commercial set up, it’s your farm and the cost is on your chest. So, the culture that I use, or the production culture, or environment that I was used to as a communal farmer is different from the production pattern in the commercial area. So you need a paradigm shift. You need to shift the software of that farmers. Your neighbour will not be there if your borehole will give you problems. It’s on you as an individual. There is a lot of challenges that these people are experiencing. You know, you can say it is a farmer and he has to produce. But it is not like that. And the government, even these people that are resettled, they take a person from where ever and put him on a piece of land where ever, expecting him to produce. No orientation, no nothing, at least, they need to be mentored to be productive. Are you taking a piece of land that used to produce millions, and you put a jockey, who does not know to ride that horse, what production are you expecting? So you have a lot of farmers that are not productive now, because you know, some of these things are done politically. If you are my comrade, I put you there, so you can produce. But just to apiece you, so I can secure a vote from you. So, that’s the landscape that we are operating.

**Su: Because it was the ministry of Agriculture that hands out these permits?**

Yes

**Si: And can I ask a question, because that was quite interesting, you said there are a lot of people that are farming commercially in communal lands. But, how does it work than? Because communal land means all the benefits you are getting is shared. How does it work, just for my understanding?**

Yes, so how it works. Let’s say I am a farmer in a communal area. I produce for my own, I have my piece of land, not land that belongs to be. It is communal land that I am doing farming on. The revenue that I generate from this is mine. So if I have a head of 100 cattle and I am selling 40 hivers or 40 tollies or 40 I don’t know how you call it, 40 cows. The 130.000 that I generate, is for my pocket. But there are facilities that we share. If there is a bore hole, it is a communal bore hole. So my 100 cattle are using the same water source than the other guy that is having 20, 40. But then, the income that they generate is for their own pocket. But then the cost, if they have to contribute to the diesel, or if an engine is broken, or for maintenance, I have to contribute, because I make money out of my farming venture. It’s your farming venture, my farming venture. So wat I do with the crops that I ‘m selling is mine.

**E: And does everyone has to contribute the same amount?**

Sometimes in a communal set-up, like we were doing some work in the communal areas as well. They have a system whereby the, let’s say you have a herd of 100 cattle. Then you calculate you pay 20 dollar per head, for the communal water point. So he’s having 40, he’s paying the same 20 dollar per head. Then the communal water point is collecting all this. Should there be something, like diesel they need to buy, or a machine or input, they buy it from that money. But then, what you do with your 5 goats that you sell, that’s up to you. That is how it works. So communal can mean many things to many people. People think it’s a communal pool, that you make money for the communal pool, but it’s not like the communists, where everybody is producing for the state. We have semi-capitalism, communalism, we have mixed approach.

**Su: what does the union do to help these farmers with their needs? You said you do lobby and advocacy, is that mainly what you do?**

You know, the space where they are operating, if they don’t have. People are making laws, and sometimes we are out of touch with reality. If you sit in your office here and things are happening down there, then you presume that that piece of legislation is helping those people and people have different take on things. If they don’t have a mouthpiece, someone through which they channel their concern, do you think the minister or politician will listen to farmers. As you can see, it’s a vast country, I have been to Netherlands once. To Amsterdam, I went by train from Amsterdam to Osnabruck. And it was like, we are in Germany now. So when you look at, from here to Oshakati is 800 kilometers. From here to the South, 1000 kilos to the border of S-A. It’s a very vast country. So that one farmer who comes from Kaprivi, if he comes to the minister and say, do you think that minister has got time to listen to that individual. So we have to be organized to address issues. And that’s what we stand for. And information also, we are having platforms of, let’s say, 800 farmers that we are in touch with. Should there be a policy or amendment, automatically those guys who are in our whatsapp groups, they get the information the same day. If let’s say, trade information, the main port of Namibia is having a way of analysing all the input from all the auctioneers every week. Let’s say the tollie is going for this, a hifer is going for that. So they send that to us and we share it with our farmers. So now, if a farmer is taking his cow to the auction, you know more or less. So that is, if N-BiG has got information on you know, anyone who likes to de-bush its farm. They send it to us and we share it on our platforms. So it’s a way, you know, information is power. If you are sitting there under the tree somewhere and you don’t interact with the world, you are lost. That is what we do.

**Su: And are the farmers that you represent also involved in any bush harvesting or removing?**

The farmer is doing anything. They are also doing charcoal, I am also doing charcoal. You have to do anything with what you have on that land in order to make a living.

**Su: maybe we can show you the concept that we are working on, it’s called the Biohub. And the idea is that in this area, there are farmers or communities that can supply biomass, and here in Namibia we look at encroacher bush. That is then brought to a biorefinery, where we use a process that produces different products. First is a bio-oil, that in the end can be used in the shipping sector, it can also be used for other things, but we are investigating the shipping sector. Second is a biochar, that can be used again in the field as a fertilizer or water purification for example, and yes, what we are investigating is how you could set up a concept like this here in the context of Namibia. So, how should it look like, who should be involved, what should the benefits be here, what products should it produce. So, that is what we want to find out here in our case study here. So if you look at this image, what do you think? What kind of benefits could, or should it generate here, especially for the farmers that you represent?**

So these are the communities, the different communities

**Su: yes, could be different communities, could be commercial, communal, resettlement**

And this is a central depository.

**Si: yes, let’s say each community produces wood chips and then we bring it there to the centralized facility to produce biofuel**

Very good, ok, no that, I mean we have got a lot of, we have the potential to do this. These are the discussions that we have, even with regional counsellor. But, one of the learnings, we learn that everything on a farm is actually, can be, trash can be turned into cash. People are talking about biomass. Biomass is anything, even the cow that is standing in your crop. They have, when you take the cow whatever, cow dung, and you put it, and you have biogas for instance. So you have it every day in your land, but then you leave it there, and we go to wherever, in order to buy gas to heat our home. Even at the household level, people are having latrines, people are having what. So we have things that people are calling trash, the cow dung there are already ways to convert it into gas. You have a lot of farm, on farm residues. You have, apart from, even the problem of plastic, everything that you use on a farm that you don’t want, that is contaminating the environment, can be used. You have these towns that struggle to manage the rubbish. You have towns that you see, plastic lying around. Ok, that is another chapter, but on a farm there is a lot of stuff that we can contribute to the central depository. If you do it on a local basis, you follow the structure of me at my farm, the town that is close to me, and a town close to you, to take it to a regional something. There is a lot of potential. I do charcoal, with charcoal you need to have certain wood that you need to use. Those twigs you can’t use. That’s what I am saying with wood chips, you need a lot of, like now the reason why we are not involved in wood chips, you need that chipping machine. The machine that processes it in that form that can be used in the value chain. So farmers on an individual basis, they have got a lot of this and also for your information. There are also certain hectares that we don’t use, because of encroacher bush. One can use that to, not debush, but do bush thinning, to buy back your grazing land. Then at least that piece of land comes back into production. So as a farmers union, and as a farmer myself, I know that there is a lot of potential that is lying there, that is untapped. Because, in my area the only place where they will actually be placing wood chips, that will be Tsumeb, for the Nampower thing, and the other thing would be Ohorongo cement, but I mean, it is far away and when you look at what you are going to get, in the end doesn’t make a lot of sense doing this. It doesn’t actually make sense. But if you concentrate and say, the farmers in this area near the depositry. I was in India, in Maharastra, you know they have this cooperatives, and these cooperatives, and the farmers are taking their produce to a central point and whatever they deliver, they get a receipt. So and, they get their share for whatever it is that they produce. And they have a central processing at the cooperative. So if you think of a structure like that, then you are reducing your carbon footprint on the environment and we are also generating a little income for the farmers. And at least the farmers feel that whatever I do, I do it, I go to town to even buy our groceries for the farm. So when I drive my bakkie, I know I have to take wood chips to the central place in my area and then the central place needs to find a way to ship it, or take it in a way that makes sense. That can work. My farmers are ready for something like that. Because you, the infrastructure does not allow, does not make sense. We throw these things away. I use that things that are required for my production but the rest we throw away. Well, we use it as ground cover, but we can do better.

**Su: and what do you think would be the biggest challenges for this system?**

The biggest challenge, the reason why we are not doing it this way is, if infrastructure is boostered, these guys with the carbon credits, but if infrastructure is put on a local level, farmers can access it, You put it in their daily life, you put it closer to their daily production. Because in the absence of infrastructure, you drive with a bag of chips for a long distance. So if you decentralize it and make it accessible for the farmers.

**Su: and what do you think would be an acceptable distance for farmers?**

It’s a big country and first you need to do piloting. There are areas where there are, you start where it is done in a, where farmers are concentrated and they are doing the same thing. So if that is your pilot then at least people can see it can be done, and it can be replicated in other areas. So you start where it matters and where it makes economic sense to start, where people can feel the difference. And then you see what’s next. There is a lot of potential in the communal areas, unfortunately, the government has a way of looking at the communal areas from a colonial point of view. Because we would like to have the same project to actually take off in the communal areas. But they have the perception of saying, in the communal areas, people will plunder the environment. They say that everybody would like to go for this or what. But they at least started with wood in the communal areas. That is where it is needed the most. Because the communal areas, the land there is bush encroached. And this is where the majority of the people are living. Our take is, why can’t communal farmers, who are also most of them are under resourced, why can’t they make use of the problem of bush encroachment and convert it into anything. It can also make a difference in their pockets. But it’s a tough battle. But at least they have started with wood. Charcoal is a bit a challenge. But you don’t talk charcoal, because the world is moving away from that one.

**Si: Let’s say for example, from our point of view, in terms of fuel, the solid types of fuel are the most inefficient. We go for liquid or gas, that is the most efficient way. So yeah, charcoal is not the best.**

I am very interested because I do a lot of, you know how people are making, out of plastic, just take it by drum, and you heat the drum, and out of the drum you have pipes form which you can make fuel. So, it’s something that is close to me. I have watched that process. I think we can do this, we can do this. And biogas, you can even, it’s gas that you can do at home, household level. You have these big gas containers. There are a lot of projects in Zambia, Kenya, I have it all on youtube. These things can be done. So if you can take a, you take a group of farmers to where it is done, and you replicate, you teach them how to do it, give them a small infrastructure, it’s not very expensive. People can do it at their home. As long as you can show, if you do this, you can take it to here, and from there it is not you problem, it’s someone else’s problem. But then, you have a small benefit that you get instead of going to town and coming back empty handed, why can’t you harvest your twigs, why can’t you take it and put it in a format that can be used on your side. If every farmer can do it, can get benefit from that, all this can fly like nothing. But you are in the process of researching, it is something that is far away from reality.

**Su: yes and you said you are also involved in producing charcoal. Do you make that yourself or how do you do it?**

Yes, we have workers, they chop, you have kilns, and what they do is. […] What we do is, you have your workers and they chop and then you have kilns, and then what they do is, you burn them. Once you burn them, you do your charcoal. And then what you do, we are also, the one problem is there are a lot of middlemen that, people who are not involved in the process, but doing the middle thing and making a lot of money. And unfortunately that is also here. So basically, what we do is, we produce and then we sell it in bulk. But unfortunately, the one challenge is to the vendors that we do business with are having connections with South Africa. So everything that we produce here, most of it is going to South-Africa. And South Africa is just rebranding it, and sell it on our behalf. There is another challenge, we also wanted to start exploring sending it to Europe, but the other challenge is really that we, sometimes you get, whenever you ship, some people are actually not very thorough in that process. When you deliver coal that is not well finished, what happens is that put it in a container and then on a ship, once it gets that wind, that ship is gone because it catches fire. So people are now worried, not to actually ship out, they want to see the process and we sell it to South Africa, and then it goes to a processor. And we sell it bulk, 32 tonnes, some of these trucks will come from South Africa with whatever, timber or steel. They go to DRC and then with their return trip, these vendors that are buying are actually using the return trip of those trucks back to South Africa. That is how we, we just do the donkey work and the other people sell. It is something that we are exploring, that the processing can be done here. When raw products are going to South Africa, there are a lot of people that you employ on the other side. Instead, you are exporting employment out of the country, together with the raw product. One would like to have it localized. So that at least the process can be done locally.

**Su: And the workers that do the chopping, do you hire them on a monthly basis, or how do you do that?**

It’s like contract, it’s like a contract labour. They only do it for that specific load. So basically you hire 5 of them and then they do the chopping and the whole process and from then you pay them what they deliver. If you would like to re-enter in another engagement, fine. If they would like to go back to their families, also fine, you will get another group to do the next assignment. They are not employed by us, they are business men on their own. They come and you agree on a price per tonne and then we pay each other accordingly.

**Si: And how much roughly do you pay?**

1000 dollar per tonne, that is just a shared interest business.

**Si: and how much do you, let’s say for example, you produce charcoal. How much cost do you inquire and how much do you sell it for?**

The basic cost is, the whole thing if on you. Because for the start up you have to buy everything that is needed, you have to house that person, you have to buy food for that person. Only the food that you buy is deductible from the earnings. If you deliver let’s say 10 tonnes, then the food that I have provided you during the production and everything that you wanted, I buy and spend, that is deducted from the income at the end of the transaction.

**Su: and how long, how much work is it for a tonne of charcoal? How many days should someone work for that?**

Well, its manual labour, so its difficult to quantify. But if you take a load of 32 tonnes, you take a month and a half with people who are hard working. So you have 5 labourers, so that is 32 tonnes.

**Si: that is 32 tonnes of charcoal**

Yes, you have to chop, you have to burn, and the whole process. You have to pack it and load it.

**Si: so for the choppers you said 1000 dollars per tonne. So that is per tonne of charcoal?**

Yes

**Si: and what would be the cost of charcoal that you sell it for? I know it depends on the market but**

It’s difficult, if we are talking about FSC certified. For you to be FSC certified, you have to put money in. People have to have decent housing, decent facilities. It’s difficult to actually get that. That is a once off payment and you recover it over time. But I, I can spend a lot of time telling you. But I have another meeting. But this industry is, you say FSC certified but then my brother is not certified, and he will use my contract to export. The checks and balances are not good. You won’t run away from unfairness in the process. My conviction is that charcoal is now in a real matter. That business is now, it is only for now, but even the world that we are doing business with is finished with charcoal. So we have to find another way.

**Si: just coming back to the question again, so how much do you sell it for? The charcoal?**

2000, what I am saying is a 50-50. But if you mechanize it, it is cheaper. But we also have to employ people to give them a little.

**E: One more question on the NECFU, do you do capacity building for the farmers or do trainings?**

Yes, we need resources to do that. You need to go out to farmers, and do the training. So but I’m saying is that right now we are handicapped, but we would like to. It is good to go out.

**Si: but in that case, what about merging NECFU with other farmers unions?**

Yes, well the meeting I am supposed to be now, is with NFFU and another one. There is an agenda of issues that we would like to address and that is the reason for that platform. So, now I am running to NNFU’s office and that is where we pick up some of the issues about challenges that are cross-cutting.

**Su: Well thank you so much for all your input and time.**