Burning Namibian bushwood in German power stations?

Lessons from the campaign against the “Transcontinental Biomass Partnership Namibia-Hamburg”

Almuth Ernsting
biofuelwatch.org.uk

Biofuelwatch
21/3/22
Memorandum of Understanding

Biomass partnerships with Namibia

between

Trier University of Applied Sciences,
Environmental Campus Birkenfeld,
Germany the Institute for Applied Material Flow Management (IfaS),

and

Ministry of Environment and Energy of Hamburg (FHH BUE)

and

Wärme Hamburg GmbH

and

Hochschule für Angewandte Wissenschaften Hamburg

on

Set up of working groups

with regard to utilization of Namibian encroacher bush in Hamburg

Germany | 02 June 2020

Tiefstack power plant, Hamburg

Project aimed to assess feasibility of energy from Namibian bushwood in Hamburg, focussing mostly on Tiefstack
Origin of this proposal

German government climate mitigation finance project carried out by GIZ (German Agency for Development Cooperation). A project promoting the industrial-scale removal of woody plants, across an area of around 30 million hectares (=size of Italy).

Controlling bush encroachment to support rural livelihoods

Project description
Title: Bush Control and Biomass Utilisation
Commissioned by: German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ)
Country: Namibia
Lead executing agency: Ministry of Environment, Forestry and Tourism (MEFT)
Overall term: 2018 to 2021

Bush encroachment: Causes

Causes:

- Higher CO$_2$ levels: Negative climate feedback (i.e. a feedback that slows down climate change because more CO$_2$ is sequestered);
- Regionally: Overgrazing and fire-suppression

Woody encroachment is a global long-term trend across semi-arid regions.

Photo: regimeshifts.org/
Industrial-scale bushwood removal and climate change

- Trees and shrubs constitute Namibia’s largest carbon sink. Removing a large share of them to generate energy in Germany would improve Germany’s ghg balance (under UNFCCC accounting rules) at the expense of Namibia’s ghg balance.

- Most studies show that large-sale bush removal depletes soil carbon, too, making the situation even worse.
Bush encroachment, removal and wildlife

- Some herbivore and bird species benefit from increased woody cover
- Some species are unaffected
- Some specialist grassland species depend on retaining patches of open grassland
- Strong case for removing patches of bushwood for habitat creation.
- Large-scale bushwood removal coupled with increased livestock grazing harms biodiversity
- More intense livestock grazing following bushwood removal = high risk of desertification
Economic impacts

Namibia’s land ownership is highly unequal. 70.1% of commercial farms owned by members of the white minority which accounts for 6% of the population.

- Who in Namibia would benefit? - No concrete answers from project proponents.
- Leading German propject partner (IfaS) has highlighted potential for significant economic benefits – to Germany and German companies!
- Germany would require low-cost biomass, which means keeping labour costs as low as possible;
- Undermining projects to create local value-chains for bushwood in Namibia
Potential for large-scale job destruction

Manual and semi-mechanic bushwood removal: Common methods today

Full mechanisation

Annual bushwood harvest of one worker

Photos: dasnamibia.org
Stopping the project

Joint Statement
against the import of Namibian bushwood for use in power and heat plants in Hamburg

Open Letter
to the Federal Minister for Economic Cooperation and Development,
Dr Gerd Müller,
regarding the GIZ project „Bush Control and Biomass Utilisation“ (BCBU)

Photo: Robinwood.de
What next?

• Watch out for similar plans emerging elsewhere in Europe;

• Conflict of interest by key consultants funded by German government (Unique GmbH) not addressed – they still advise on many other projects;

• Need to examine the role of GIZ played in Namibia