

# Beef production for organic markets

- A future for Namibian family farms?!

*Ina Cramer, beef and dairy cattle farmer on Farm Rogers, a 'Namibian Organic' farm, Vice-chair of the Namibian Organic Association*

## Summary

Overseas organic beef markets and its premium prices offer big opportunities for Namibian cattle farmers, who mostly come from a very close to organic farming background but have to fight against various economic problems as well as to deal with droughts and climate change to farm successfully and stay on their farms.

## Background

Namibia, the driest country in sub-Saharan Africa, is home of two deserts as well as vast savannahs. Most parts of the country receive an average rainfall of approximately 270 mm annually during a rainy season spreading over two to six months per year.

Due to this climate and the fact that water is a very rare source, the keeping of livestock –cattle and sheep- is the only sustainable way of farming in most parts of the country.

On most family cattle farms in the central and northern parts of the country, a cow herd is kept to produce both replacement heifers as well as oxen for the slaughter market. All cattle are kept on the *veld* (*local term for rangeland*) and forage on the naturally available grasses and bush. A mineral lick, containing of salt, phosphate and urea is usually the only supplement given.

Oxen are usually slaughtered at the age of 24 – 30 months, at one of the two ISO certified export abattoirs and the prime beef is exported to the EU and Norway. Lower quality meat, as well as meat from older animals, is sold locally or exported to South Africa.

Due to severe droughts in the 90s (climate change) and rising production costs as well as rising costs of living and disproportional rising beef prices, the profit margin of the traditional beef production dropped in such a way, that cattle farming alone was not longer economically worthwhile for most families.

Farmers searched for alternative ways of generating income, like accommodating foreign trophy hunters and game farming. These activities were profitable, but lead to a drastic decrease in the national cattle herd as well as to degradation of the natural rangeland. Bush encroachment, due to overstocking, as game couldn't be managed /wasn't managed like cattle proved to be another negative factor.

Remaining cattle were often sold too early, at weaning stage, due to a big demand from South African feedlots and high weaner prices.

The current world economic crisis led to a sharp decrease in foreign trophy hunters and less foreign money. In addition the current national drought makes a huge impact.

The situation during the past years led to an enormous debt within cattle farmers, where every cattle walking on commercial farmland is, on the average, indebted with around 70% of its market value.

Many family farms were sold, and as farming is a popular weekend occupation for Namibia's

business tycoons and political elites, the prices for farm land sky-rocketed; but the land is in most cases not used for farming purposes any longer, but instead left barren or used for game breeding.

## **Main chapter**

Namibian beef is currently a very sought after product in the UK and Norway. It is derived from free ranging, grass fed animals, produced without hormones and the routine-use of antibiotics and without the de-forestation of any rainforests.

However, the current beef prices of maximum Euro 2.00 per kg of slaughter weight are much too low to make cattle farming a profitable business. Therefore it is absolutely necessary, that Namibian cattle farmers get access to a premium market as well as paid a premium price for their beef.

As running and maintaining ISO certified slaughter facilities for a decreasing number of slaughter animals as well as the transport of beef to the EU are quite expensive, it is unrealistic from the producer site to expect a better price from the local meat corporations.

Therefore better beef prices for Namibian producers can only be realised, if a better price on the overseas market can be achieved.

Organic beef and the premium paid for such meat might be the answer.

However, there are still a few restrictions preventing the access to such markets:

1) Protein: Namibian farmers are mostly adding urea, an artificial uric acid, to cattle licks during the dry months of the year. By feeding urea, cattle are enabled to convert the dry grass to protein. The use of urea is prohibited in organic agriculture. Without supplementing it, cattle are generally in a worse condition during the dry months of the year, leading to negative / slow growth during this period as well as to low fertility rates. Indigenous, small framed cattle are better dealing without urea, but using alternative supplements (i.e. EM) and / or other locally available protein feeds (i.e. Zambian cotton seed cake) have to be tested and explored.

2) Animal health care: Very few knowledge and resources are available regarding non-allopathic veterinary treatments, as local conditions are in most cases not comparable to the situation in other parts of the world.

Although a lot of Namibian cattle are adapted over generations to the local conditions and by using management practices like regular pasture changing health problems can be prevented in most cases, these management practices are simply not known by all farmers or viewed as old fashioned. Therefore resources are needed to do research on animal health issues as well as to train / convince farmers.

## **Core message & conclusion**

Organic beef production could be the answer for most Namibian cattle farmers to keep them on their family farms, as it offers sustainable, low input production systems and access to a premium price market.

However, some restraints have to be overcome before a broad access to those markets will be possible.