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WIMSA

2. WORKING GROUP OF INDIGENOUS MINORITIES IN SOUTHERN AFRICA (WIMSA)

THE NETWORK ORGANISATION OF THE SAN OF SOUTHERN AFRICA

Axel Thoma & Kxao Moses =Oma (Namibia)

Kxao Moses =Oma belongs to the Ju/'hoan-speaking San group that is living on remnants of their ancestral land in the north-east of Namibia. He was born in 1962. From 1981 till 1989 he worked for the former government as register officer. He assisted in the Literacy Programme in Tsumkwe. After that he joined the Nyae Nyae Farmers' Space Co-operative (NNFC). He was appointed as the manager of NNFC in 1994. Kxao gained a lot of experience in development work and dealt with a number of donor agencies. He played a major role in acquiring a conservancy for Nyae Nyae. Kxao Moses =Oma is currently the WIMSA chairperson.

The San's Current Situation in Southern Africa

Only a small minority of the estimated 100 000 San in Southern Africa inhabit remnants of their ancestral land while the majority eke out an existence as labourers on cattle posts and farms, as gatherers of bush food and, if legally permitted, as hunters in remote areas with limited infrastructure and poor-quality land or as squatters near towns.

The economic base of the majority of San is generated from the production and marketing of crafts, from guiding or performing for tourists, from earning small salaries as labourers on commercial and communal farms or, in the cases of Namibia and Botswana, from government pensions paid to elderly community members in possession of identification documents.

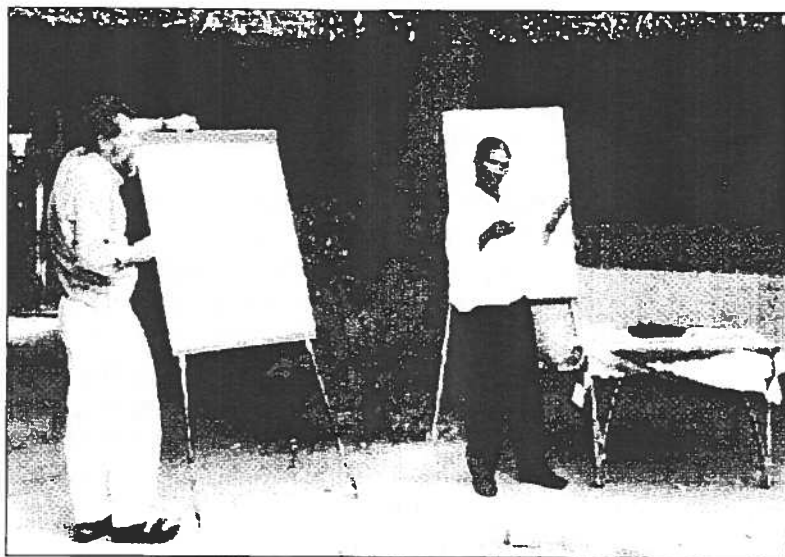
It is estimated that more than 60% of the San population in Southern Africa are illiterate. A high school drop-out rate is evident, particularly among girls. This may be attributed to the near complete lack of access to mother-tongue education experienced by San children, to their being discriminated against by fellow pupils and teachers and to

corporal punishment and authoritarian teaching methods which are alien to their traditional upbringing.

Social problems among San communities have increased in recent years. It has become apparent in their traditionally egalitarian society that the gap has widened between the older and younger generations, between the employed and unemployed and between formally and traditionally educated community members. Problems within families and communities have resulted from disrespect, jealousy and mis- or non-communication between their members. The escalating violence among San individuals is usually accompanied by alcohol abuse.

San women generally seem to be less exposed than San men to the external world and they have attained lower formal educational qualifications than the men in their communities have done. Consequently San women tend to be shy and passive in their approach to participating in formal project meetings. Women who have decided to continue their formal education or to acquire skills training are often verbally and physically abused by their husbands who do not comprehend their wives' aspirations.

San communities in Southern Africa are still being marginalized and discriminated against in terms of access to information, fair remuneration for work and treatment as equal citizens and they struggle to secure rights to land and natural resources. They are trying to gain recognition as partners in negotiations with government and private industry, they desire a culturally appropriate school curriculum and mother-tongue education for their children and they aspire to directing their own development projects.



Axel Thoma, Petrus Vaalbooi and Braam Leroux (1)

The History, Structure and Purpose of WIMSA

During the Regional Conference on Development Programmes for Africa's San Populations held in Windhoek in 1992, the San representatives in one of their

recommendations noted the need "to form committees to represent [ourselves] at local, regional and international levels". A needs assessment on the establishment of a regional San network was carried out in 1994, which included consultations with San communities in Botswana, Namibia, South Africa, Zambia and Zimbabwe. Regional NGO representatives, government officials and international academics focusing on San affairs were also consulted. By early 1996, after funds had been obtained in 1995 from the donors Norwegian Church Aid (NCA) and the Protestant Association for Co-operation in Development (EZE) of Germany, the regional WIMSA was established in Windhoek, Namibia and WIMSA/Botswana in D'Kar.

The general assembly, being the highest official body of WIMSA, consists of San representatives delegated by member organisations and is responsible for formulating policies on major issues affecting WIMSA's future. The WIMSA board of trustees currently comprises three San board members and three alternates each from Botswana, South Africa and Namibia. According to the WIMSA constitution the board members' powers and duties focus on the management and control of WIMSA affairs. The board of trustees is entitled to delegate authority and power to the WIMSA co-ordinators.

The WIMSA mission statement, prepared by the San delegates during a board meeting in May 1997, focuses on the assistance that WIMSA should give the San to enable them to gain political recognition, to obtain better access to natural and financial resources, to raise human rights awareness among their communities, to become self-sustainable through development projects and to regain their identity and pride in their culture, thereby improving their self-esteem. Consequently the San delegates at the San Conference hosted by WIMSA in Gross Barmen, Namibia, in September 1996, requested WIMSA's support in the sectors of education and training, development

planning, control over tourism, gaining access to and securing land, obtaining project funds, procuring legal advice and co-ordinating San affairs across the regional borders.

WIMSA's Activities and Related Constraints

Since its inception in 1996 WIMSA has been involved in a wide range of activities which have yielded happy and sad moments with each achievement and setback. The description of activities that follows, reflects the encouraging potential that WIMSA enjoys in its work with the San. But negative aspects should not be excluded thus some thoughts about the constraints encountered will also be presented.

In the sector of education and training WIMSA provided six-month on-the-job training courses in its office for young San and held a series of workshops with San leaders from Namibia on land tenure, income-generating possibilities and specific community problems. WIMSA played an important role in organising the First Secondary School San Learners' Conference held in Windhoek in 1996 and provided opportunities for San delegates from the Southern African region to participate in regional workshops, international conferences and exchange visits abroad.

During the training activities it became apparent that the objective of obtaining skills to act as community facilitators regarding cultural and developmental issues did not particularly appeal to some of the young San trainees. In fact the participation of the relevant trainees seemed to be motivated by a desire to earn a substantial salary and therefore course evaluations which did not result in an invitation to participate in a second course at the WIMSA office sometimes led to a feeling of hostility on the trainee's part due to the loss of a potential source of income.

WIMSA activities relating to institutional capacity-building comprised board and general assembly meetings, providing support to and/or advising WIMSA member organisations and visits to San communities by WIMSA delegates. The San regarded the opportunity of exchanging views and sharing experiences within the context of a community visit as extremely valuable.

On several occasions, however, WIMSA delegates experienced a lack of acceptance of democratic principles by a prominent San leader who did not concur with decisions reached by a two-thirds majority during consultations with his community or who otherwise influenced some of his community members to the extent that they refused to talk to the WIMSA delegates. Participants in WIMSA meetings have also witnessed attempts by a few San individuals to divide WIMSA member organisations in their lobbying efforts for San rights.

As a regional networking organisation WIMSA is not involved in implementing projects. However San communities have continually requested WIMSA's advice in their efforts to plan projects, raise funds and generate income. Where a number of communities are involved in a project it seems relatively easy, if time-consuming, to reach consensus on the project's goals, but where the goals cannot be achieved within a short period of time it appears to be an equally natural response of individuals to demand compensation from one another. It seems that individual advantages often supersede collective interests.

The issues of land tenure and control over tourism have required a great deal of patience, motivation and commitment from all parties involved. For example, it took two-and-a-half years to negotiate and sign a balanced agreement between a San community and a lodge owner who had entered into a joint tourism venture. Also, the struggle to prevent the Namibian government's planned

eviction of Kxoe community members from a portion of their ancestral land has continued since May 1997.

The concept of WIMSA being a San-owned organisation has led a few San individuals to think that WIMSA properties and funds belong to them and that they are therefore entitled to constantly demand whatever they or their community needs. Lengthy discussions on this issue revealed that they believe it unnecessary to prepare project proposals and account for funds spent.

Conclusions

It is hoped that the above-stated constraints will be interpreted as constructive criticism and as an invitation to openly discuss the causes of recurring problems that lead to

frustration within San communities and sometimes to dissatisfaction with WIMSA. All San communities which have approached WIMSA have agreed to uphold the principles of accountability, information sharing, transparency, responsibility, solidarity and democracy, but in reality this agreement has not always been manifest. This may be ascribed to human nature, but the fact that the San are the most educationally, economically and socially marginalized of indigenous groups in Southern Africa and the fact that they are experiencing a period of transition, should also be taken into account.

Lessons learned in similar endeavours undertaken by indigenous peoples on other continents may provide additional insights and lead to solutions and improvements.

"The significant thing about the conference was that we met people who used to suffer like ourselves (ie. people from overseas) and exchange ideas of how to upgrade our lives in a way that won't provoke anybody."

(Nicodemus Barkard, Botswana)