

A case for a biomass-based economy in Namibia

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NAMIBIAN OIL FIELD S ... An aerial view of bush encroachment in north-central Namibia, stretching as far as the eye can see, in all directions.

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NAMIBIA is currently facing an uphill economic battle, having recently slipped into a recession, coupled with a staggering unemployment rate of over 30%, which is exacerbated further by low international commodity prices, affecting some of our largest national income earners from the mining sector.

So, what if we told you that Namibia is sitting on the equivalent of 400 million barrels of oil, going completely unnoticed? It's not in any deep, inaccessible offshore deposits, but rather, it is growing right in our backyards. Not only is it well within reach, but you can even harvest it with an axe.

Namibia's standing biomass resource, stemming from bush encroachment, is exactly that. It is equivalent to 400 million barrels of oil, which, if valued in today's terms, is worth northwards of N\$370 billion, or approximately three times the country's gross domestic product (GDP) in 2016. However, if it were actual oil, there would be a thriving industry around already, spurred on by our government, international conglomerates, and international markets. The fact is, our biomass resource isn't oil, but that doesn't make it any less valuable. On the contrary, being so readily accessible to the average Namibian means that our biomass resource will have far wider reaching micro and macro-economic benefits than that of a traditional oil-based industry.

Not only will the harvesting and processing of this biomass resource have the potential to sustain thousands upon thousands of local jobs, but it would also have the added benefit of supporting more productive agriculture and tourism as a result, amplifying the benefits further still.

Some will argue that the resource has not gone completely unnoticed and that Namibians are indeed exploiting our biomass resource, however, the magnitude of our current utilisation is unremarkable, to say the least. Take the well-established charcoal sector as an example; Namibia is one of the world's largest charcoal exporters, however, the total biomass currently being harvested towards our annual charcoal production equates to a paltry 0,15% of the total standing biomass resource of the country. At this rate, Namibia would need to increase charcoal production by a factor of 20, simply to mitigate the annual spread of bush encroachment over our rangelands.

We should not forget that bush encroachment is largely a man-made problem, caused by generations of mismanagement, stemming from lacking information, misinformation, and myopia.

So, unless we are willing to wait for nature to sort itself out, which it would invariably do, at its own lumbering pace, we have to actively try and reverse this imbalance of bush that we have ourselves caused. We now face a national challenge. We have thousands of farmers who are paralysed by the impenetrable thicket of bush covering their lands, as they are unable to continue rearing livestock as they once did.

The ever-worsening situation has left them in a dire financial situation, leaving them exposed to other external factors such as drought, fluctuating livestock prices, and ever-increasing input costs.

It goes without saying, but the resource is not going to extract and process itself. The upcoming Biomass Technology Expo 2019, taking place on 9 August, at Otjiwa Safari Lodge, will act as a platform to provide our biomass industry with the necessary tools for efficient harvesting and processing of this vast resource. The expo will focus on bush-based fodder production, modern charcoal production, efficient harvesting techniques, hi-tech surveying and aftercare technologies, services, and more! The event is open to everyone, and especially farmers who are struggling to make ends meet in these trying times.

As Namibians, we have the will to do something about this challenge and subsequent opportunity, but we do not necessarily have the best tools to do so.

Many building blocks are already in place to allow for a thriving biomass-based economy in Namibia; we have a strong regulatory framework, promoting the sustainable use of the resource; we have some of the necessary skills; we have the local and international investors available to fund these activities; and we have a string of supporting bodies, including but not limited to the Namibia Biomass Industry Group, the Namibia Charcoal Association, the De-bushing Advisory Services, and the GIZ-MAWF Bush Control and Biomass Utilisation project. We even have foreign markets knocking at our doors, asking for the resource in volumes we can barely fathom. So, what is keeping us back?

To visit or exhibit at the Biomass Technology Expo, contact the Namibia Biomass Industry Group!

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