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Vulnerability, isolation and
apartheid: A case study of

Port Nolloth

by

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VULNERABILITY, ISOLATION AND APARTHEID: A CASE STUDY OF
PORT NOLLOTH

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An important aspect of poverty is the vulnerability of people over time to fluctuating economic conditions. Poverty studies with a restricted time depth may mask such vulnerability at a given historical moment, and it is therefore important to ascertain salient factors which may affect vulnerability to changing conditions. These may include, for example, demographic factors such as isolation or population size, levels of skill or training which might allow alternative employment, and - particularly in the South African case - the impact of restrictive legislation.

This paper examines some of the factors which increase the vulnerability to poverty of the population of Port Nolloth - a small, isolated town on the West Coast of Namaqualand, just below the Orange River, which has been subjected to a series of booms and depressions over its history.

The Town

In 1854 Commander M.S. Nolloth of H.M.S. Frolic was sent to

survey the Namaqualand coast for a suitable harbour to serve the copper mines of the interior. He recommended a small bay, known as Robbe Baai, which had a reef affording some protection from bad weather, and this became the site of a small harbour. The area was named Port Nolloth in 1885 by the Governor of the Cape at the time, Sir George Grey.¹ Port Nolloth began as a very small settlement - Smalberger (1975:87) reports that there were only three or four houses in the area by 1864 - but grew as links improved with the interior. In 1869 a narrow-gauge railway line was begun to link Port Nolloth with O'okiep. The railway - an engineering *tour de force* - crossed the semi-desert from Port Nolloth east to the mountains by 1871, reaching Steinkopf in 1873 and O'okiep in 1876 (Smalberger, 1975:86, 98ff.).

With the rail link established, and the copper mines increasing production, the population in Port Nolloth grew steadily as more copper was shipped to the coast. Table 1 below reflects population changes in Port Nolloth for the period 1870-1983.²

1. See Carstens (1962), Smalberger (1975), and West (1971) for what little has been recorded on the history of the town.

2. Sources: Official Union Yearbook, 1938; Population Census 1960, 1970, 1980; Smalberger, 1975:89; 1968 figure based on 30% random sample conducted by the writer; 1983 figure from Port Nolloth Town Clerk.

Table 1
POPULATION: 1870-83

1870	200	1951	1943
1875	448	1960	2592
1891	855	1968	3690
1911	1684	1970	2853
1921	856	1980	3160
1936	1572	1983	3000

The population of the town grew steadily up to 1911, and was linked to increasing production in the copper mines of the interior. The slump in population in 1921 reflects the closing of the main mining operations in 1918: Port Nolloth lost much of its population and most of its employment opportunities in one blow. In 1968 the oldest residents of Port Nolloth referred, in the words of one, to the "dark days" when poverty was everywhere, and husbands and fathers left to look for work - some never to return. Copper was never again a crucial factor in Port Nolloth. When the mines resumed production in 1941, ore was shipped south by road and rail - and the O'okiep-Port Nolloth railway line closed in 1942, with the rails being torn up and sold for scrap.

Port Nolloth's future was thereafter linked to fishing and diamonds. In 1918 a small crayfishing industry was established by Mr Andrew Ovenstone, and this became increasingly important to the economy of the town, particularly when the export market began to grow. In 1927 diamonds were discovered in the area, and Port Nolloth was turned briefly into a boom town, as all manner of people rushed to the area to make their fortunes. Port Nolloth was the centre of activity, until the state intervened

after six months to establish the State Alluvial Diggings (S.A.D.) at Alexander Bay. The S.A.D. provided employment for Whites, and was seen as a solution to the 'Poor White problem' of the time (West,1971:27).

With increasing control over the growing diamond industry, there were no more quick fortunes to be made legally, and many of the fortune-hunters and tradesmen left. Port Nolloth became much quieter, but the expanding crayfish industry and the development of the S.A.D. ensured that the town did not experience the recession of the 1920's. The port remained an important link with the outside world, servicing the mining communities of Alexander Bay to the north and Kleinsee to the south, and the town served as a minor commercial and administrative centre for the area.

Port Nolloth experienced steady population growth - largely related to the growing fishing industry - until the late 1960's, when the industry failed, and a number of people were forced to leave the town in search of work. The population picked up again in the late 1970's as the result of a brief period of activity involving off-shore diamond mining. At the height of these activities there were 24 boats operating from Port Nolloth, owned by several companies. There was a resultant premium on accommodation in the town, increased commercial activity, and the creation of new work opportunities for some residents. The population has remained relatively static since then, despite a slump in 1983 following a drop in the diamond price, which put

many workers in Port Nolloth on half-pay.

Port Nolloth in 1968³

The population of Port Nolloth in 1968, in terms of legal population categories, was 3000 Coloured people, 400 Whites and 290 African migrants.⁴ The migrants were nearly all on nine-month contracts, and were required to return to the Transkei thereafter. The number of migrants was regulated by the state: in 1968 a maximum quota of about 400 men was authorised. The White population included both 'outsiders' and local people. The former were those who were temporarily located in the town as senior management in local industry, or as government officials (police, postal workers, and so on) on a limited tour of duty. Their source of employment therefore lay outside the town, and was not greatly affected by local fluctuations. The 'local' Whites were employed largely in less senior industrial positions, or were involved in local commerce. They were in general much less mobile than the 'outsiders', and more vulnerable to changing

3. This section is based on fieldwork conducted in Port Nolloth for five months in 1968. This included a random sample of 30% of the households of people classified as 'Coloured'. The results were published in West (1971).

4. The purpose of using these categories is not to support the system thus reflected. Different classification, however, results in differential treatment in various areas, and this is germane to later discussion.

local conditions.

The Coloured community in Port Nolloth grew with increasing employment opportunities, as people migrated from the interior. In 1968, no less than 80% of adults had been born outside the town, but their average length of residence was 14 years (West, 1971:11). At the time of the survey, 55% of all men of working age were employed by the fishing companies, and 26% of all women, although these levels were regarded as being unusually low. The fishing season at the time had been relatively poor, and a number of people had sought alternative work in the town. A further 30% of working men were employed in local industry (mainly by Consolidated Diamond Mines), with 15% of the women being employed in local commercial or domestic service (West, 1971:23-4). The unemployment rate amongst men was 5%, but was not recorded for women.

The seasonal nature of the crayfish industry is also crucial, in that most company employees earned for only eight months a year. Registered regular workers were paid an off-season 'subsistence allowance' ('sub') of R2 per week for men and R1.50 for women. Fluctuating wages and other factors made annual budgeting extremely difficult, and even after reasonable seasons there was considerable hardship in the off season (see West, 1971:24-6). This was exacerbated by high food prices, poor housing conditions for many, and a high consumption of alcohol among many fishermen (West, 1971:34). The major fishing company

held the only liquor licence in the town, and local people commented to me that wages paid out on Friday afternoon were often retrieved by Saturday night. This was seen by some as further evidence of the grip exerted by companies over the local population.

Many people in Port Nolloth thus experienced an annual cycle of poverty - the perceived inevitability of which contributed to its perpetuation through a feeling of hopelessness and frustration that in turn was manifested in the failure to save even when this was possible, a retreat into drinking, and so on. One concrete manifestation of this was that Port Nolloth was acknowledged by the local authorities - although no overall figures were available - to have a high incidence of TB in the poorer sections of the population.

The period of the late 1960's and early 1970's is significant as it saw the progressive collapse of the fishing industry as catches dwindled. Those affected most were the fishermen whose wages were tied to their catches, and not the various categories of shore staff who had fixed salaries. In 1968 shore staff were paid between R7 and R25 per week, depending on skill. Ordinary fishermen, working in pairs, were together paid R5-6 per 100 crayfish caught (the lowest rate on the West Coast at the time), but could earn considerably more - or considerably less - than shore staff in any given week. Senior managerial, technical and administrative staff were most insulated from the slump -

although there was some uncertainty as to the future, the most senior employees could count on being absorbed in other areas of their parent companies. Most of the people in this category, in any event, had sufficient skills to be reasonably assured of alternative employment in the event of the closing of the local factories.

Of the fishermen, the most senior employees were most secure. The skippers, 'drivers' (engineers), and mates nearly all had some formal qualifications, and knew both that they would be the last to be retrenched, but also that they would have a good chance of similar employment elsewhere. Those most vulnerable were the ordinary fishermen, although some of the more experienced men with good contacts elsewhere on the coast left to find more reliable employment. But the majority remained, their options being restricted for various reasons.

The fishermen with the fewest options were the African migrants, who were bound by the terms of their contracts to remain in Port Nolloth, irrespective of earnings. In 1968 the off-season 'subs' applied to fishermen during the season if they had had no catches in any given week, and this was quite insufficient to support families. One company, in fact, deducted these 'subs' from future earnings; the other major employer did not. Groups of migrants approached management at various times in the 1968 season to ask to be released from their contracts as they were not earning enough. These requests were refused, and

in one instance a large group marched to the magistrate's office to petition him. The magistrate was away at the time, and the men were addressed by the chief of police who threatened anyone who deserted with prosecution. A magistrate subsequently confirmed that the men had to stay.

Despite this, some men deserted, and the manager of the largest factory laid charges against them. At least one deserter was traced to the Transkei, brought back to Port Nolloth, found guilty and served a three week sentence before being sent back to his employers, who promptly fired him and left him destitute in Port Nolloth (West, 1971:46-8). It was made very clear to the remaining migrants that they were tied to their jobs irrespective of their earnings. The justification given was that the season might improve and then they would be needed. No attempt, however, was made to increase 'subs' in the interim, and people were urged to go to sea even if the weather was unfavourable. One manager warned his men that they would be 'locked up' if they refused to go to sea.

Coloured fishermen had rather more mobility, in that they were not limited by the severe restrictions applying to contract workers. However there were a number of factors which limited their own choices. Firstly, there were very few jobs - and virtually no accommodation - available in the interior. Secondly, there were some restrictions upon movement of Coloured fishermen to fishing jobs which were available in Namibia. Those

wishing to leave for Luderitz or Walvis Bay were required to get permission from the local magistrate. This was regarded as a formality, and had reportedly been so, until the fishing crisis of the late 1960's. In 1968 this permission was refused by the local magistrate - allegedly after pressure from a local manager who was concerned about losing skilled workers. These refusals caused considerable resentment until it was discovered that the necessary permission could be obtained from the magistrate in Springbok (see West, 1971:58).

A more important limitation on mobility related to housing. In 1968 only 26% of the total Coloured population of Port Nolloth lived in company-owned housing - provided by CDM and the fishing companies. The latter housed their senior employees first, and 44% of their occupants in 1968 were not fishermen, but shore-based employees whose employment as we have seen was rather more secure. The rest of the population - including most fishermen - lived in the 'lokasie', a large squatter area of self-built corrugated-iron houses. The type of housing occupied was crucial to labour mobility. Those in the 'squatter area' could change jobs, and even leave Port Nolloth, without affecting their accommodation provided they continued to pay the R2 per annum site rent to the municipality. And with the shortage of housing elsewhere, it was common for people who left to seek work elsewhere to leave their families behind in the 'lokasie'.

Those in the company housing estates were much more restricted,

as their accommodation depended upon continuous employment. The fishing companies provided rent-free housing which was much superior to the 'lokasie', with services including water and sanitation. CDM provided the best housing, with extra services including gas and free medical and dental clinics, for a rental of R1.50 per month. Workers with company housing were therefore extremely reluctant to seek alternative employment because this would mean automatic eviction. Company housing was seen as a definite means of control over workers by management, and eviction, or threat of eviction, was reportedly used on certain occasions (West, 1971:59).

The closing of the factories in 1970 saw numerous fishermen leave to seek work elsewhere, although most left their families behind, and the overall population did not decline as much as it had done when the copper mines closed nearly sixty years earlier. Many people who were unable to find work elsewhere, or were unwilling to give up their housing, stayed in Port Nolloth and attempted to find odd jobs. This period saw considerable hardship for many people. The life of ordinary fishermen in the town was already extremely difficult, with the seasonal nature of employment, and unpredictable wages from week to week. A bad season, or a variable one, would cause considerable economic hardship to many; and as we have seen, most people struggled badly in the off-season, when there was considerable poverty. The failure of the fishing industry and the closing of the main

factories exacerbated this already precarious situation.

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Port Nolloth in 1983

By 1983 the composition of the population of Port Nolloth had changed. There were no African migrants in the town, and many confirmed fishermen had left the area in the early 1970's as migrants. Those that remained behind tried to find different work locally. Many families of migrants still lived in Port Nolloth, profiting from the accommodation available in the squatter area. The survey confirmed census data that there had been little change in the size of the population over the last five years or so. Some people had left the town, but this had been balanced by limited in-migration.

A major change in the economy of the town in this period was the introduction of off-shore diamond mining. This capital-intensive activity began in the 1970's with a number of small companies being granted off-shore concessions. The development of off-shore diamond mining drew a new White

5. Fieldwork was conducted in Port Nolloth for brief periods between 1973 and 1983. Statistics in this section are from a survey of 100 houses drawn from representative Coloured residential areas in April 1983. This will be dealt with more fully in West (1984).

population to the town, consisting of diamond company officials, divers and various technical support staff. It also provided some limited employment opportunities for local people, and provided a new stimulus for the local commercial sector. Although crayfishing had resumed on a very small scale, the major companies had not re-opened - although one company continued to pack crayfish caught elsewhere, and provided some women with part-time employment. Employment opportunities in this sector, therefore, were extremely limited.

The following tables refer to employment changes in Port Nolloth between 1968 and 1983 for people classified as Coloured.

Table 2
Occupations: Coloured Men

<i>Occupation</i>	<i>1983(I)</i>	<i>1968(I)</i>
Fishing	15	55
Local industry	36	30
Off-shore diamonds	18	-
Self-employed/professional	3	5
Pensioners	7	5
Unemployed	21	5
Total:	100	100

It will be seen from Table 2 that the number of men employed in fishing has dropped greatly, that local industry has absorbed a few more workers, and that the offshore-diamond industry provided a significant amount of employment. Most noticeable, however, is the leap in unemployment from 5% to 21%.

Table 3
Occupations: Coloured Women

Occupation	1983(%)	1968(%)
Fishing factories	16	26
Domestic service	22	8
Local Industry	17	7
Home managers	21	54
Pensioners	6	5
Unemployed	18	-
Total:	100	100

A number of points need to be made about Table 3. No figures were collected for unemployment in 1968, whereas in 1983 18% of those interviewed were seeking work. It is not known how many listed as home managers in 1968 were on the job market, but it is my impression that there were relatively few. There were only a limited number of jobs available for skilled people in the fishing factories. These jobs paid up to R30 per week, and were not full time, as the factory worked shifts only when there were enough crayfish to pack. The only other significant source of employment was domestic service, where wages of R10-15 per month were common, and hours were long. These jobs were therefore not considered worthwhile, except in extremity. Coupled to this was the very real difficulty of home management in the 'lokasie', with the acute problems of water and fuel, where women had little time for outside employment. Fuel in the form of gas or paraffin was very expensive, and many people used to spend long hours trekking into the interior in search of wood. There was no running water in the area, and householders had to queue at a tap - open at limited times - to fill 44-gallon drums, which then had

to be rolled home over the sand dunes.

In 1983, the situation was considerably different. One factory was still packing fish from elsewhere on the coast on a reduced scale, and employment opportunities there had dropped considerably since 1968. Local industry was employing more people - and had more or less made up for the loss of factory jobs. Most significant, however, was the increase in the numbers of those in domestic service, despite its unpopularity, and those actively seeking work. This can be attributed to at least two factors. It is likely, to a small extent, that the move from the 'lokasi' to the new municipal housing estate made for easier domestic circumstances which freed some women from time-consuming chores, and allowed them to seek work. More importantly, however, it is likely that the high general unemployment rates among men and increased housing costs had forced women into domestic service to contribute to falling family income, and that wives of absent migrants also found themselves in need of added support.

The increased cost of housing relates specifically to the imposition of Group Areas in the town. Group Areas were declared in Port Nolloth in 1967, and required that nearly 70% of the total Coloured population should move, including everyone in the 'lokasi'. Actual moves were suspended until alternative housing became available, and by 1983 nearly 400 houses has been built by the local authorities in an area known as Nollothville in the

proclaimed Coloured Group Area. The houses in Nollothville were nearly all 'sub-economic' structures, with running water, sanitation, no electricity and minimal finishing. Rentals ranged from R30-R70 per month, depending on income and size of house. There were many complaints about the new housing - including their inadequate size and poor finishing - but most complaints focussed on the high rentals and cost of services, compared with the 'lokasie', and 24% of those interviewed in Nollothville said that they had preferred their previous accommodation.

Those who had moved into Nollothville from the 'lokasie', therefore, were forced to pay a great deal more for their housing - and had no alternative but to move. Their old houses were then demolished. People were not allowed to return to the lokasie, and feared what would happen to them were they to be evicted for non-payment of rent, as some were being threatened by the local authorities. The municipality, on the other hand, needed to repay housing loans, and although they had temporarily lowered rents to R10 per month for a few desperate cases and offered R10 per month to people who were prepared to sweep streets and do other cleaning jobs in the town, they had no answer to the deteriorating economic climate. The local Town Clerk admitted that people would have to be evicted, and that there was no alternative housing available for them. At the same time, people still living in the 'lokasie' were awaiting their turn to move with considerable trepidation. By mid-1983 it did not appear

possible that the 'lokasié' would be cleared for the foreseeable future. Funds for the housing estate had been expended, and there will still a sizeable number of families to be moved.

The proclamation of Group Areas and the subsequent building of Nollothville within a Coloured Group Area had an even more drastic effect on the few African men living permanently in the 'lokasié'. Following the declaration of the Coloured Labour Preference Area in the 1950s, no new permanent African residents were allowed in Namaqualand, although a few people qualified to remain by virtue of long residence, thus qualifying under Section 10 of the Urban Areas Act. A couple of men had been living in Port Nolloth for many years, and had married local Coloured women and had children. They were disqualified from living in Nollothville as it was a Coloured Group Area, and technically their wives and families were also disqualified, as they would be classified as African for the purposes of the Group Areas Act (Dison and Mohamed, 1960:8). The Port Nolloth local authorities turned a blind eye on this, but in mid-1983 the local Coloured Management Committee leaders were contemplating evicting one man from Nollothville, and preventing the other from moving in (West, 1984).

The local employees of Consolidated Diamond Mines (CDM) had remained relatively unscathed by the closing of the fishing industry and the development of the new housing estate. In 1968 CDM workers had on average earned less than fishermen in a good

season, but they earned more securely and enjoyed better housing and a number of fringe benefits. Some people had complained in 1968 about being in the 'boss's house', and thereby tied to their employment, but in general most people interviewed accepted the drawbacks in favour of the extra security offered.

This security was rudely shattered in 1983 when a fall in the price of diamonds led to cut-backs in the local CDM operations. In mid-1983 the CDM work-force was put on half-pay for an indefinite period. Again the tied housing was important in keeping people attached to the company, even in those few cases where some might have found better-paid alternative employment. The same conditions also threatened those employed by the off-shore diamond concessions - which in any case were regarded by many as being ephemeral.⁶

In addition to providing cheap accommodation for local people, the 'lokasie' had also been an important staging-post for people coming off the White farms and reserves of the interior (Sharp & West, 1984). We have seen that families could come to Port Nolloth and house themselves cheaply while looking for work. In 1982 the local authorities requested that Port Nolloth be proclaimed under Section 3c of the Prevention of Illegal Squatting Act (1976). In terms of the proclamation, made in 1982, employers may not employ

6. It was noted that the largest diamond companies - such as CDM - did not get involved in this branch of the industry.

Coloured people and bring them into Port Nolloth without approved housing. This effectively instituted a form of influx control for people in the region, affecting the poor in particular. The increased control over the 'lokasie' area, and the demolition of houses once people had been moved to Nollothville, also contributed to the vulnerability of local people by curtailing their housing options.

Some Conclusions

Workers in Port Nolloth have been dependent on copper, crayfish and diamonds at various times in the history of the town, and none of these has proved ultimately secure. The closing of the copper mines reportedly produced the worst slump in the town, and caused the most hardship. The fishing industry was relatively unstable throughout, its seasonal nature ensured alternating periods of poverty even when catches were good, and the unpredictability of earnings contributed to overall instability. The diamond companies provided most stable employment in Port Nolloth - partly because the relatively small work-force was involved with support functions that remained constant irrespective of mining activities. But in 1983, as we have seen, even these workers felt the effects of the drop in the price of diamonds.

The vulnerability of workers to these fluctuations was accentuated by a number of factors. The physical isolation of the town made it extremely difficult for people to seek alternative employment elsewhere in the region, and the lack of diversification in the town itself limited opportunities locally. There was also no organised labour activity in the town. A fishermen's union apparently had existed for a while in the 1940's, and had led strikes for better wages, but it foundered after conflict between pro- and anti-union workers. Fishermen in Port Nolloth in 1968 were the lowest-paid in the industry, but had no bargaining machinery.

Vulnerability to impoverishment among less-skilled workers in Port Nolloth was not of course uniform. A few people, had access to resources elsewhere. Some fishermen had contacts in other fishing towns which enabled them to move to new jobs, and a very small number of people had access to limited resources in nearby reserves, mainly in the form of animals, owned personally or by close kin, which could be a source of support in time of need.⁷ While the fishing factories were open, certain families were demographically advantaged through having a number of sons who could earn through fishing full- or part-time from their early teens, and those fishing families who also had women working in the factory were assured of a more steady income, as well as a

7. The reverse was also true in good years when resources flowed in the opposite direction.

double 'sub' in the off season. Also important, in terms of differential vulnerability, was housing. Those 'worst-off' in terms of quality of housing were ironically less vulnerable than those in the estates.

The history of Port Nolloth stresses the need for the study over time of economic disadvantage. In the fifteen year period under discussion, then, all workers in Port Nolloth at one time or another had their vulnerability exposed. A synchronic study of any particular period might have recorded either poverty or plenty for the same workers, and security of employment in one sector changed over time with changing conditions. In the case of the copper and diamond periods, this followed wider economic fluctuations as mineral prices rose or fell. In the case of the fishing industry earnings were dependent not only on local and export price changes, but also on local factors such as the weather, and changes in state-controlled fishing regulations which determined catch quotas, the length and timing of the season, and the minimum legal size of crayfish that might be caught.

Vulnerability was further accentuated by various apartheid structures, which placed legal impediments in the way of those seeking to improve their lot. Race classification, for example, was crucial in determining differential vulnerability. African migrants were subject to the most stringent controls, and were denied any mobility even in times of extremely low earnings. The

few permanent African residents, as we have seen, were at extreme risk as the result of Group Areas, and might be forced entirely from the town, and possibly separated from their families as a result. People classified as Coloured had more mobility, but suffered from tied housing and the effects of Group Areas. Whites, by contrast, had far fewer restrictions than anyone else.

The poor of Port Nolloth have suffered as a result of their isolation and lack of alternatives in the face of changing economic conditions. To this has been added the impact of key institutions of apartheid - race classification, migrant labour, Group Areas, anti-squatter legislation - which have combined to exacerbate the plight of the poor and the powerless, and render them even more vulnerable to changing economic conditions.

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