

CHAPTER 1

OVERVIEW OF THE SOUTHERN AFRICAN REGION

1.1 The region of Southern Africa is defined as that group of countries stretching from the northern most point of Tanzania to the southern tip of Cape Province in the Republic of South Africa. Southern Africa is an immense land mass, some 6.8 million square kilometres, bordered by the Indian Ocean in the East and the Atlantic Ocean in the West. The distance from the northern border of Tanzania to Capetown, on the southern tip of the continent is approximately 4000 kilometres. The region resembles Australia in the size of its land mass and its distance is the same as traversing Australia from Cape York to Wilson's Promontory.

1.2 The sheer size and diversity of the continent of Africa led the Committee to focus the terms of reference on those countries most affected by the abolition of apartheid in South Africa and who are members of the Southern African Development Community (SADC). Mauritius, newly admitted as the twelfth member to SADC, was added to the terms of reference in September 1995. Table 1.1 lists the SADC countries and their political status.

Table 1.1 Countries of the Southern African Development Community¹

Country	Date Independence Won		Political Status
Angola	1976	from Portugal	Unitary Republic
Botswana	1966	from Britain	Multi-party Democracy
Lesotho	1966	from Britain	Hereditary Monarchy (a)
Malawi	1964	from Britain	Multi-party Democracy
Mauritius	1968	from Britain	Multi-party Democracy
Mozambique	1975	from Portugal	Multi-party Democracy
Namibia	1989	from South Africa	Democratic Republic
South Africa	1934 (b)	from Britain	Unitary Republic
Swaziland	1967	from Britain	Traditional Monarchy
Tanzania (Tanganyika, 1961; Zanzibar, 1963)	1961	from Britain	Republic
Zambia	1964	from Britain	Unitary Republic
Zimbabwe	1980	from Britain and white settler regime	Unitary Republic

Notes: (a) Although Head of State, the King has no executive or legislative power.

(b) The Union of South Africa was established on 31 May 1910, as a dominion of the British Empire. In 1934, under the Statute of Westminster the Union achieved status as a sovereign state within the British Empire. Following a referendum, dominion status was given up and the Republic of South Africa established on 31 May 1961.

1 Davidson, B. (1989) *Modern Africa. A social and political history*, second edition, London: Longman, pp. 276-278; and DFAT Submission pp. S272-S415.

Land, climate and subsistence

1.3 Geographically, eleven of the twelve countries of the Southern African Development Community occupy all of southern Africa and part of eastern Africa. The island Republic of Mauritius is located in the Indian Ocean directly east of the island of Madagascar. There are two islands, Mauritius and Rodrigues in the Republic and two sparsely populated dependencies, Agalega and the Cargodos Carajos Shoals. The island of Mauritius is well situated for shipping lanes and, over past centuries, was used extensively as a free trading port by British, French and Dutch traders on their way to the spice islands, East Africa and India. It has a sub-tropical humid climate ideal for growing sugar-cane and tea, its major agricultural exports.

The Rift system

1.4 Some of Africa's best farmland is found in the rich volcanic soil of the Rift system which extends into Tanzania, Malawi and parts of Mozambique and Zambia. Maize is the main subsistence crop but other crops such as cassava, sugar, sisal and groundnuts are harvested. A number of very large lakes form the centre of the Rift system. In southern Africa, Lake Tanganyika runs along the western border of Tanzania, while Lake Nyasa engulfs most of Malawi.

1.5 South Africa, Mozambique and Tanzania have direct access to the Indian Ocean. They all experience hot summers with temperatures ranging from 25 to 39 degrees Celsius. Along the eastern seaboard, the land rises to uplands where the climate is cooler and less humid. Rainfall is variable with most of Southern Africa having suffered long and unrelenting periods of drought in recent times.

The Southern Plateau

1.6 The Southern Plateau covers much of Southern Africa. Most of it is flat or rolling grassland used for crops and pastures. Rugged mountains and cliffs rim the plateau in the south and west. Lesotho is particularly mountainous, marked by distinct seasons and a cold winter with temperatures as low as -7° in lowlands and -18° in the highlands.² There are six land-locked countries that rely on their coastal neighbours for access to the ocean. These are Lesotho and Swaziland (situated within South Africa), Botswana, Malawi, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

1.7 Severe prolonged drought in Zambia has impeded its attempts to reach self-sufficiency in some crops such as wheat and maize. The droughts have also caused long-term damage to its livestock industry and the country must still rely on food aid to feed its population.³ Zimbabwe is normally self-sufficient in food crops, with large scale production of maize, wheat, soya beans and groundnuts. In recent times, they also have been hit by severe drought conditions and about half of the population are dependent on food aid. The situation is even worse in Malawi where three times in four years, agricultural production has declined and an estimated four million people are being kept alive on food aid.⁴

2 *The World of Information. Africa Review 1995, 18th Edition*, The Economic and Business Report, CNN International, London: Kogan Page and Walden Publishing, pp. 94-96.

3 *ibid.* pp. 215-217.

4 Francois Casteran, 'Drought stalks 14 million in southern Africa', Agence France Presse, 8 Sep 1995.

1.8 Botswana is a country of contrasts dominated by the Kalahari Desert in its southern and western districts and the Okavango Delta, a large swamp (16000 sq km) in the north-west of the country. Only 5 per cent of land in Botswana is suitable as arable farm land. Its subsistence crops are maize, millet and soya beans. Botswana relies heavily on livestock produce and mining.⁵ Its capital, Gaborone is SADC headquarters and the home for the Southern African Centre for Co-Operation in Agricultural Research (SACCAR).⁶ This centre coordinates national agricultural research and operates a small research grants program.

1.9 In contrast, apart from a small part of northern Transvaal, South Africa experiences sub-tropical climatic conditions. The altitudes of the plateau allow for cooler temperatures and the vegetation ranges from forests in the south and east, to Mediterranean-type scrub, grasslands and semi-arid land to the north and west. Production farming and sound infrastructure allows for greater diversity in agriculture. For example, wheat and wool exports, citrus and deciduous fruit and game farming gained favour during the 1980s.

Western plains

1.10 The countries facing the Atlantic Ocean have hotter and drier climates than their eastern neighbours. Much of Namibia is semi-arid land. It is dominated by plateau and it has a narrow desert, the Namib, which runs along the coastline for 1600 kilometres. Grasslands cover most of the plateau. In northern Namibia, better soils allow communal farming to be carried out and maize and millet are the main crops grown.

1.11 Its northern neighbour, Angola, has a sub-tropical climate in the northern regions and a temperate one in the southern regions. Before the civil war, which lasted from 1975 to 1991, Angola was the fourth-largest coffee-grower in the world. Since the ceasefire, efforts have been made to rehabilitate the coffee plantations under French and UN financial assistance.⁷

People, culture and language

1.12 The estimated population of the region is in excess of 120 million people.⁸ Without exception, all the SADC countries have experienced the effects of colonialism and in the period since having obtained their independence, most are establishing 'African' identities for themselves. This has not been without considerable upheaval and internal conflict.

1.13 African culture is not a homogeneous one although the village way of life remains central to many of its indigenous people.⁹ In the Republic of South Africa alone, there are nine major indigenous tribes as well as descendants of Dutch, German, Huguenot, British, Asian and Indian settlers.¹⁰ Speaking for the Western Australian Chapter of the Australia-Southern Africa Business Council Incorporated, Mr Butler stated:

5 *The World of Information. Africa Review 1995*, op. cit., pp. 15-19.

6 *Africa South of the Sahara 1995*, 24th Edition, London: Europa, 1995, pp. 117-119.

7 *The World of Information. Africa Review 1995*, op. cit. p. 9.

8 *ibid.*

9 Mazrui, A.A. 1986. *The Africans. A Triple Heritage*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, p. 295.

10 DFAT, Submission, p. S350.

In terms of understanding the people, I think you need to have people who have lived there or people who are very aware of the political subtleties, the race subtleties. Race is a very important issue there. There are the various tribes and their interrelationships. I think a lot of people do not see that; they just see that it is one black people, and it is certainly not that.¹¹

1.14 The strength and importance of tribal leaders should not be overlooked by other countries engaged in dialogue with Southern Africa. Bridging the cultural gap between traditional values and laws imposed by western-style governments has meant that, at times, differing values have led to violence, particularly in urban areas. Poverty, human rights, employment and land claims are powerful issues to be addressed across all cultures in the region.

1.15 There is little doubt that the SADC countries will continue to undergo considerable change. In evidence to the Committee, Professor Lea¹² pointed out that he believed we will see a move towards an 'Africanisation' of cities over the next fifty years. That is, the European influence in the cityscape will recede and African cities will take on a distinctive flavour of their own, as other cities in other parts of the world reflect their specific environment.

1.16 African cultural diversity is reflected in the number of indigenous languages spoken across the region. There are over thirty major tribal languages spoken in the region, as well as Afrikaans, French, German, Creole and Bhojpuri. English is the official language spoken in the SADC countries except for Angola and Mozambique. Because their colonial roots lie with Portugal, Portuguese and Spanish are spoken officially in both countries, although English is used in business. The newest member of the Commonwealth, Mozambique has recently listed English as its second official language.

Australia's relations with Southern Africa

1.17 Australia has much in common with the countries of Southern Africa. Like Australia, most of the SADC countries are members of the Commonwealth with the exception of Angola. Mozambique sought support from Australia to be admitted to the Commonwealth and other SADC Commonwealth countries strongly supported Mozambique in its application for membership. President Mugabe of Zimbabwe represented Mozambique's case at the Commonwealth Secretariat in London.¹³ At the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) held in Auckland in November 1995, the Commonwealth voted to welcome Mozambique into its ranks.¹⁴

1.18 Australia has supported sanctions against the apartheid regime since the mid-1970s. Its bipartisan support for the dissolution of apartheid has remained a constant factor over the past twenty years and has given a 'human rights' focus to our interests in the region.¹⁵ Australia was in the vanguard of the anti-apartheid movement, working through the Commonwealth and other international forums for the dismantling of that regime. It also

11 ASABC, Transcript, 4 October 1995, p. 319.

12 Lea, Transcript, 6 September 1995, pp. 86 & 89.

13 DFAT, Submission, p. S460.

14 'Mozambique joins the club.' *The Age*, 13 November, 1995.

15 DFAT, Submission, p. S266.

assisted the Front Line States (FLS) with aid programs to help those countries resist South Africa's campaign of destabilisation. As a result, there is a 'significant fund of goodwill' towards Australia among Southern African countries.

1.19 However, the Australian Government has been criticised for not taking a more proactive role in increasing our engagement with Africa:

The government's push towards refocusing Australian eyes on Asia has had the unintended effect of making Africa drift off into nowhere, as it were. Given the fact that the strongest economy in Africa was out of bounds because of apartheid, that has prepared the ground for Africa to be almost forgotten. It has drifted off into the periphery of Australian consciousness...¹⁶

1.20 Although there is greater political stability in the Southern African region, it still faces enormous economic challenges, as does indeed all of Africa. Africa has been hardest hit by global recession. Total international aid to Africa has been falling since 1990 and Africa's share of world trade, at two per cent, is declining.¹⁷ World Vision News reported that there is a growing international perception that Africa is beyond help.¹⁸ One submission argued that Australia was most visible in Africa through humanitarian, relief and development operations of the non-government organisations.¹⁹ The submission claimed that:

One of the dangers inherent in very high profile Australian NGO involvement in Africa has been the media perceptions of Africa in crises and with a begging bowl. This has engendered an attitude of hopelessness and fostered a naive assumption that expertise is unidirectional.²⁰

1.21 It is to SADC's credit that those countries are trying to resolve their domestic problems and strive for self-sufficiency. The Committee felt that continued international support was essential for real economic growth to occur in the region particularly in this time of transition in government. This issue is more fully addressed in Chapter 8, which deals with development assistance to southern Africa.

1.22 Unfortunately, many Australians still perceive Africa in terms of stereotypes and broad generalisations. Although rather extreme in its description, the following observation was made to the Committee:

There are some 53 countries in Africa. They have a diverse and interesting cultural heritage, some unique and spectacular scenic attractions and tens of millions of peaceful, hard-working citizens. However, to the average Australian, Africa consists of (a) South Africa - the white bits, and (b) Black Africa, an extremely dangerous place where mad dictators rule, AIDS can be caught by shaking hands

16 Alexander, Transcript, 6 September 1995, p. 122.

17 ACFOA, Submission, p. S736.

18 World Vision Australia, Submission, pp. S676-S678.

19 Dorward and Geddes, Submission, p. S45.

20 *ibid.*

and people routinely go about killing each other with machetes/AK 47s. Perhaps a slight exaggeration, but not much!²¹

1.23 The Committee agrees that a more balanced view of Africa is needed and that this could be achieved with increased cultural, government and business interchange between Australia and SADC.

1.24 Our common experiences with Southern Africa extend beyond our Commonwealth membership to include similar land and climate conditions, such as the problems of farming large expanses of semi-arid land, deforestation and erosion. Prolonged drought and the need for effective management of water systems are common to both continents and Australia has much to offer by way of technical expertise. Conversely, bilateral research and joint venturing will boost Australia's profile in Southern Africa and build awareness and understanding between our cultures.

1.25 Southern Africa can now lay claim to being one of the most democratic regions in Africa, with successful multi-party elections in Malawi, Mozambique and Zambia, Namibia's independence and South Africa's transition to a multi-racial democracy. Care must be taken to guard against complacency, however, as the peace in both Mozambique and Angola is fragile. Africa has had many examples of emerging democracies being overwhelmed by military or ethnically inspired dictators. As the countries of SADC move towards democratic systems of government, their methods of governing and problems relating to the implementation of public policy become more closely aligned with the Australian experience. The Committee believes that Australia has an important role to play in supporting countries who are undertaking democratic elections and to promote good governance among the SADC countries through dialogue and technical assistance.

The role of South Africa

1.26 There is no doubt that, since the abolition of apartheid and the formation of the Government of National Unity (GNU), South Africa has influenced the region in a powerful and conciliating manner. South Africa is Australia's key Southern African trading partner and its development and ability to sustain itself will affect its smaller neighbours' ability to develop. Poverty and unemployment are endemic problems in Southern Africa. If the region is to overcome its long term problems, South Africa will need to sustain its political stability and improve conditions for its 40 million people.

Australia's interests

1.27 In its submission, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) set out what it saw as being Australia's principal policy interests in Southern Africa:

- to promote economic reform and capacity building both to improve the material conditions of Africans and to encourage the development of visible export and investment markets for Australia;
- to encourage efforts to foster regional security in Africa by contributing to processes of preventive diplomacy and peace building.

21 Macpherson Consulting Group, Submission, p. S811.

- to secure vital African support for Australian objectives in multilateral and international organisations
- As a good international citizen, to support democratic reform and good governance and to provide humanitarian relief in times of need.²²

1.28 The extent to which Australia has been meeting these policy objectives is examined in subsequent chapters of this report.

22 DFAT, Submission, p. S 265.

