Sustainable Livelihoods in Southern Africa - Project Details & Key Findings

**Themes**

Three broad themes were explored by the research:

**Livelihoods** - How do poor people gain access to and control over land, water and wild resources and through what institutional mechanisms?

**Institutions** - How do emerging institutional arrangements - in the context of emerging rural development initiatives - affect poor people's access to land, water and wild resources? What institutional overlaps, complementarities and conflicts enable or limit access? What new governance arrangements are required to encourage a livelihoods approach to rural development?

**Governance** - How do different ways of looking at policy, such as market-orientated approaches, rights-based approaches and decentralisation affect rural livelihoods in practice? What new governance arrangements are required to encourage a livelihoods approach to rural development?

**Case study areas**

**Mozambique** - Morrumbala and Mganja districts in Zambézia province were the focus of the research in Mozambique. Not only is this province the poorest in the country, it was also the location of some of the biggest agricultural companies in the colonial era. With its wealth of natural resources for agriculture and forestry, private sector interest is again growing.

**South Africa** - Ingqua, a new local municipality in the eastern portion of the Wild Coast forms the study district. Examples of government initiatives are in existence in the study area, making it a good focus for the study of institutional and policy change, in the context of a livelihood focused development effort.

**Zimbabwe** - The main field site is Sangwe communal area in Chiredzi district, Masvingo Province. This is in the lowveld region of the country which receives low rainfall, although the soils are relatively fertile and the grazing is of good quality. The patchwork of land uses and tenure arrangements in the area makes for an interesting setting for exploring questions of institutions, policies and natural resource management, particularly in the context of the ongoing upheavals over land.

**Key findings**

**How have livelihood strategies changed?**

**Mozambique** - Agriculture remains firmly the core livelihood. Overall, no major secular changes in livelihood strategies have been observed, although changes in security situation, flooding etc, have had major impacts.

**South Africa** - There has been a long-term shift from agricultural livelihoods to non-agriculture based livelihoods, with remittance income and pensions particularly important. Nonetheless agriculture and other land-based activities remain important components in the livelihoods of a significant proportion of rural households.

**Zimbabwe** - Agriculture remains central to people's livelihoods in the study areas, although the impact of drought in the last two decades has undermined many earlier strategies based on extensive livestock rearing and farming. Today, there is more reliance on horticulture and small-scale irrigation, as well as contract farming arrangements with private companies.

**How has the changing institutional landscape affected people's livelihoods?**

**Mozambique** - Institutional arrangements at the local level are in flux. Tensions between traditional authorities, project structures and, increasingly, following attempts at decentralisation, local government and central ministry structures and officials characterise the local institutional landscape.

**South Africa** - The lack of capacity of local government, and on-going political and other tensions
between new governmental institutions and traditional authorities remains a major issue. Thus, in
different sites, trade-offs and negotiations play out in different ways, with different consequences
for rural livelihoods.

Zimbabwe - Multiple competing institutions and authority structures operate at the local level. For
different resources (land, water, wild resources) access is mediated differently. This presents much
uncertainty, with considerable institutional overlap and contested authority. In the context of the
current political uncertainty and the struggle over land, this is clearly heightened.

**How have changing relationships between public and private spheres affected
livelihoods?**

Much rural development rhetoric across the three countries focusses on the potential benefits of
private sector involvement in rural areas, through a variety of investment, contract, joint venture
and co-management arrangements.

A particular recent policy focus has been the encouragement of public-private 'partnerships', in the
form of joint ventures, lease arrangements and so on, between private companies and rural
communities (e.g. around tourism and wildlife utilisation).

Mozambique - Recent policies have attempted to find a balance between private sector interests and
community rights (e.g. the Land Law, and Forest and Wildlife Act), but many difficulties have been
faced in implementing these. A major challenge will be to explore mechanisms whereby such private
sector involvement will ultimately benefit poor rural livelihoods.

South Africa - Economic growth initiatives have been attempts to encourage private sector
investment in deprived areas with potential. In all such initiatives, benefit sharing or at least trickle
down and multiplier growth effects are assumed to result in benefits for the rural poor. The degree
to which this is going to happen, given the way such initiatives have been set up is, however, open
to question.

Zimbabwe - A range of private sector operators have seen the lowveld as an important economic
resource, particularly in the context of the growth of the wildlife and tourism industry. In many
respects there has been a blurring of the boundaries between public and private, communal and
commercial with some major consequences for how and where people gain their livelihoods.

**Whose interests are served in existing policy processes around land, water and wild
resources?**

A wide range of experiences are evident, with often complex, uncertain and ambiguous processes
by which local people can engage in policy debates.

Participation is very much part of the rhetoric of most rural development programmes in all case
study countries. Yet, in practice, issues of power, control and authority dominate.

Having become accustomed to development interventions by the state, NGOs and others over long
periods, many rural people are adept at responding to the external framings of policies, which in
many cases are not appropriate to their needs.

**Policy directions**

Redistribution as a prerequisite. External, donor-led interventions in southern Africa have focused
on a standardised reform agenda, without appreciating the historically inherited structural
inequalities. Greater thinking needs to focus on real redistributive reforms, particularly in land, but
also in other areas. Simplistic neo-liberal economic reform and liberalisation policies have been
ineffective in delivering economic and livelihood benefits to the poor across the region. Increased
inequalities have made things worse for many, disrupting past livelihood practices and undermining
forms of social security and safety net. Land is perhaps the key livelihood resource, even in areas
where agriculture is not the major source of livelihoods. This is because land can act as security, as
a means to gain access to other livelihood options, and as a lever for other forms of investment and
linkage. Land reform - including land tenure reform - is therefore central to rural development
policy.
The politics of the ‘free’ market. Market engagement is critical for rural livelihoods. But markets are socially and politically embedded institutions. Access to markets for the rural poor is highly differentiated, influenced by the differential market power of different players, high transaction and entry costs and so on. These broader features matter, if poor people are to benefit from a market economy, and alliances with the private sector. Conventional approaches link successful private investment and entrepreneurship exclusively with private property rights. But other forms of ownership may be just as viable at generating livelihood opportunities, if effectively supported. The obsession with private property as the only route to success must be abandoned in favour of a variety of different approaches, backed by legal and other supportive measures.

Multiple decentralisations. Different forms of decentralisation are occurring in parallel, and often in ways that compete with each other. Administrative reform in sector programmes to allow for decentralised delivery of services may compete with political reform allowing for democratic, decentralised local government. New political authorities with downward accountability to electorates may be undermined by decentralised service delivery (through line ministries, NGO or donor projects etc.) which has upward accountability to the funder. More funds come down the line than from local taxation, potentially further undermining the capacity and sustainability of local democratic institutions. Democratic decentralisation is premised on a particular form of local democracy, which may sit uneasily alongside other forms of local authority which gain legitimacy through other routes. The conflicts between new local government authorities (councillors and councils) and ‘traditional’ authorities (chiefs and headmen) are rife. In some settings party-related affiliations further influence the power dynamics at a local level. Without resources, new elected authorities may quickly lose legitimacy, and fail to provide the development benefits they claim. In practice multiple, parallel systems exist, with opportunities for confusion, high transaction costs and conflict. Local government reform must therefore take account of existing power and authority systems and not wish them away in the development of new systems of local governance.

Realising rights. Rights on paper and rights in practice are two different things. But a rights-based discourse at the policy level does open up possibilities for poor people to claim rights, but only if the relevant support and capacity is there. Otherwise intermediary organisations and institutions tend to exclude, reinforcing existing power relations and resource access. Indeed, a rights discourse may be used to support a continued neo-liberal approach to land reform, or as the basis for water privatisation. If a rights-based approach is to have an emancipatory, livelihoods-enhancing result, support for rights claiming, including the development of movements focused on livelihoods issues, will be an important route for capacity development among poor communities, although challenges of language, communication, information and organisation are raised.