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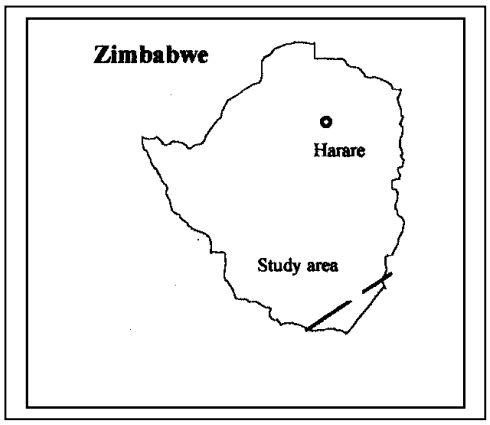
Changing Policies and Livelihoods in Sangwe Communal Land, Southeastern Zimbabwe

Key Points

- Policies and local practices relating to land, water and wild resources seem to be in conflict
- The multiplicity of institutions mediating access to land, water and wild resources does not necessarily augur well for livelihoods in Sangwe.



Inside this issue:

Introduction

The briefing looks at some key policies that have influenced local people's access to and use of land, water and wild resources in Sangwe in Southeastern Zimbabwe. This is followed by a synopsis of the changing institutional map in Sangwe. This sets the stage for a discussion of preliminary findings on the diverse strategies used by local people to gain access to and use of land, water and wild resources. But first, let us look at some of the specific features of Sangwe communal land.

Sangwe communal land is in the northeastern corner of the district of Chiredzi. The district was established in the 1960s. It shares boundaries with Mozambique and South Africa and the Shangaan and Ndau peoples who live on the three sides of these boundaries have close cultural affinities.

Rainfall in Chiredzi varies between 450 and 650mm per year. Sangwe is therefore prone to seasonal droughts and severe dry spells but this does not prevent local people from growing maize, cotton, legumes, vegetables and keeping livestock. There are formal and informal markets for these commodities. Internal and external labour migration is common.

Sangwe has 21 766 people or 13% of Chiredzi's population. Population density is 45 persons per square km compared to the national average of 27 people per square km. Sangwe has a land area of 48 441 hectares or 2.8% of the district total of 1,710, 239 hectares. The people in Sangwe live in 5 wards represented at Chiredzi Council by elected councilors, but there are also traditional chiefs and their coterie.

Changing Policy Narratives on Land, Water and Wild Resources

The social and economic geography of Chiredzi derives its roots from past policies that ensured the appropriation of land, water and wild resources for the benefit of a few. This resulted in the creation of sugar plantations owned by multinationals, wildlife conservancies, and ranches for game and livestock. Shangaan and Ndau peoples were confined to less fertile native reserves (now called communal lands)

such as Sangwe. Land alienation together with the imposition of taxes and the growth of new tastes led many local people to look for work within Chiredzi, Zimbabwe and South Africa (cf. Bannerman, 1980).

Since 1980, the government's land reform policy has shifted from one informed by the willing-buyer/willing-seller principle to one that is driven by administrative fiat. During the period 1980-1984, the policy of growth with equity was coupled with one that sought to resettle an ambitious 167,000 families. In Sangwe, the government resettled a few people on Chizvirizvi scheme which has 24,230 hectares (Chiredzi AGRITEX Office, 2001). This is about 1.4% of the land area of the district.

Between 1985-97, government adopted two seemingly conflicting policies on land. The Land Acquisition Act of 1992 enabled the government to compulsorily acquire land for resettlement. At the same time government embraced World Bank and IMF sponsored economic reforms meant to deepen the role of market forces and to create a leaner, and perhaps mean, government. This inconsistency could be read as reflecting competing narratives in the policy arena that sought to find the best way forward in relation to, among other things, land, water, wild resources and livelihoods.

However, historical and newly created inequalities seem to have steered opinion among the rural poor that land and market reforms were actually benefiting a few citizens, and excluding them (Mayo, 1995:8). Moreover, market reforms were not addressing some of the constraints faced by the rural poor in Sangwe, namely inequitable land and water rights, and lack of meaningful access to the lucrative wildlife resources in the area. Some local people in the area, as in other parts of the country, have engaged in the land policy process in a rather different way. During 1998-2001, some have, with the help of war veterans taken to 'self-provisioning.' That is to say, they have occupied commercial farms as a method of transferring land to themselves and pointing to the state's delays in addressing the question of land and livelihoods.

The state's traditional response was to evict land occupiers. But since the year 2000, and for reasons closely related to the opening up of space for competitive politics and the resurgence of the narrative of economic nationalism, the state is now using land occupations as an 'official' strategy of designating and redistributing land. The Protection of Land Occupiers Act of 2001 is a case in point. The Gonarezhou National Park, a number of ranches, and conservancies that border on Sangwe were occupied. Land in some of the ranches has since been parceled out to the occupiers. The actual processes are being looked at more closely at the moment

As we have noted above, the lowveld is susceptible to droughts. In the past, the Shangaan and Ndau coped with this environmental uncertainty by establishing settlements near major streams and rivers such as Save, Runde and Chiredzi. They also cultivated riparian gardens.

With the advent of land alienation the option of riverine gardens was foreclosed. In fact the practice became illegal. In addition, policies defining rights to water were inextricably tied to land ownership. Water passing through private land was in practice considered private property. Thus all those who had title deeds to land were the ones who could easily obtain water rights. The majority of these were large-scale commercial farmers (Matinenga, 1999:221).

Moreover, use rights of water were allocated by the state in perpetuity on a first come first served basis. In times of water scarcity, those who applied for water rights earlier had the first priority to use water (GoZ, 1997: 28). In Chiredzi, the major water rights holders were the sugar plantations and other private commercial farmers. Communal people in Sangwe were excluded from exercising water rights. They could only use water from rivers, wells and streams for primary or domestic purposes.

This policy framework existed until 1998 when a new Water Act was passed. Its main premises are that water is a 'public good' to be managed by a decentralized system of catchment, sub-catchment councils and water user groups. About seven such councils are to be established in the major hydrological zones of the country. Sangwe falls within the Save catchment but for various reasons this new policy has yet to see the light of day in Chiredzi district.

The narrative of decentralizing water governance seems, in part, to derive its roots from similar experiments in wildlife management. In the past, formal control over all wildlife was appropriated by the state and then through a sequence of enactments, provided hunting rights to resident whites and visiting sport hunters (Murphree, 1997:4). The use of wildlife by blacks was criminalised. For communal people in Sangwe, as elsewhere, who were forcibly moved to pave way for the Gonarezhou National Park, ranches and conservancies, wildlife was a complete liability. In 1982, a new policy of decentralizing wildlife management was introduced. It allowed the Department of National Parks to engage a broad spectrum of organized interests to conserve wildlife in parks and safari areas near communal land. This led to the formation of CAMPFIRE in which ward 5 in Sangwe is involved. Differences among social groups in terms of their access to wildlife seem to influence their perception of costs and benefits. As a result, cases of poaching still occur and constitute an important livelihood strategy for those concerned.

The proposed establishment of a game corridor which will link Gonarezhou to Kruger in South Africa and Gaza in Mozambique will add to the complexity of coping with wildlife for local people. It is not clear how they will benefit from this new set up.

The Changing Institutional Map

There has been a multiplication of institutions that mediate access to land, water and wild resources at the local level.

Ward, village, family heads, party leaders, war veterans and the district land committee are contesting the role of traditional authority in land allocation (see quotation above).

'The current fast-track land reform has resulted in power struggles between war veterans civil servants and traditional leaders such as chiefs, headmen and kraalheads' (Interviewee, Field Notes, February 2001)

However, the authority of Chief Tsovani and his two headmen Chitsa and Gudo seems to be resilient as a power base. These traditional authorities often link environmental health with ancestral guardianship and this is articulated using the medium of religious belief. In consequence, traditional authority is still important as it mediates access to land.

At the household level, men inherit land from within their families. Women have secondary usufruct rights which they get by virtue of marriage.

The institutions that play key roles in mediating access to wild resources in Sangwe are the Department of National Parks and Wildlife Management and various NGOs. These include, among others, the Zimbabwe Trust, WWF, SAFIRE (Southern Alliance for Indigenous Resources) and the Lowveld Environment Awareness Programme, LEAP.

Water is an important resource in this dry area. Whereas in the past, female members of households fetched water from community wells, streams and rivers such as Chiredzi, Mkwasine and Save, a number of boreholes were drilled by NGOs and the government and are supposed to be run by user committees. A number of these boreholes are not in working order due to lack of money for repairs. Others run dry. Some households therefore continue to use wells and river water for domestic purposes. There are a few irrigation schemes of which only one is working, that is the Tsovani irrigation scheme. The others were hard hit by Cyclone Eline and have since not been repaired. Entrance requirements for the only functional irrigation scheme are high and preclude many people in Sangwe. In consequence, the scheme has an aura of exclusivity to it and it is managed by a committee of well to do farmers.

Differential Access to Resources

Whilst there are noticeable inequalities between safari operators, ranch and conservancy owners on the one hand and communal people in Sangwe on the other, there is social differentiation within the communal area itself. In their struggle to make/earn a living, households in Sangwe achieve this to varying degrees. As a result, Sangwe is differentiated along social, economic, and political lines. To this extent, two broad categories of wealthy and poor households were identified during wealth ranking exercises and focus group discussions. This categorization reflects, to a greater extent, local people's own definitions of wealth or the lack of it.

Households that were classified as wealthy are those of local retail shop owners, leaders of both traditional and modern institutions, civil servants, successful farmers with plots in Tsovani irrigation scheme, and senior party officials. Poor households comprise those headed by women, itinerant labour migrants, and subsistence farmers.

Wealthy households typically own 20+ cattle, 3 or more ploughs, retail shops/stores, grinding mills, buses, cars, and brick houses with asbestos roofs. They cultivate 4-10 acres; hire out their oxen to the poor for money and patronage. They are able to send their children to school and have household members in formal employment who remit part of their incomes. Most of their labour is drawn from the poor whom they engage in part-time jobs. They pay the poor in cash or in kind. Poor households have few or no cattle at all, they cultivate small pieces of land i.e. 0.5-3 acres, and have little or no food. They survive by selling their labour and taking part in the food for work programme. They have no money and cannot afford to keep their children in school

There are therefore qualitative differences in the livelihood strategies used by well-to-do and poor households in Sangwe. Wealthy households were said to have not only been given larger plots by village heads but to have acquired plots in the fast-track resettlement programme through the greasing of palms. However, they also buy or rent fields from the poor. Pre-mortem and post-mortem inheritance also plays its part in transferring larger plots to members in this group. Women in rich households gain access to land through their husbands.

In relation to dry land farming, wealthy households mostly grow cash crops such as maize, cotton, and sunflowers. They are also plot holders in Tsovani irrigation scheme where they grow cotton, maize, legumes and vegetables in summer and wheat in winter. Their output is sold to local people and to companies such as the Cotton Company of Zimbabwe, Cargill, and the Grain Marketing Board. These companies provide them with loans to buy inputs and to hire labour during peak periods in the agricultural season.

Although poor households also get land from traditional leaders, these tend to be smaller in size. As a result of land scarcity within Sangwe, some poor households have also acquired land in the fast-track resettlement programme. Members in these households inherit small pieces of land. They rent out their fields and receive payments in cash or in kind. They grow crops that are similar to those of well-to-do households but on a much smaller scale.

Because they spend most of their time working for others this affects their own farming. In consequence, this solidifies their dependence on the wealthy for patronage so as to gain access to cattle, ploughs, food, piece jobs and money.

Whilst some of the well to do have their own boreholes, others use community boreholes. However, these boreholes are also accessible to the poor. Fetching water is a female chore. In cases where the boreholes run dry, women travel long distances to look for water. Irrigation water is a preserve of wealthy households. High membership fees and annual contributions make the only functional irrigation scheme inaccessible to the poor.

'CAMPFIRE is more about the national park than us. We used to hunt and eat meat often but now there are too many restrictions.' (Field Notes, Feb 2001.)

On the face of it, both wealthy and poor households have access to wild resources but there are subtle nuances to this. Take for instance, the CAMPFIRE programme. In ward 5 proceeds from the programme were used to build two teachers' houses and a tuckshop, and to buy a grinding mill. Although all adult members of Ward 5 in Sangwe are said to be beneficiaries of CAMPFIRE dividends, single members of households do not receive these. Furthermore, local micro-political dynamics have resulted in some households not receiving any dividends at all. Moreover, a few wealthy household heads in Ward 5 are the leaders of the CAMPFIRE programme. This having been said, the poor in Sangwe in general rely more heavily on wild resources for their survival than their rich counterparts. They are the major harvesters of mopane worms, fish, insects, wild fruit, birds, medicinal plants and thatching grass. They are also the poachers of wildlife in Gonarezhou National Park, and Malilangwe and Save Conservancies.

Conclusion

It remains to be seen whether the current land reform programme will indeed improve the livelihoods of the poor in Sangwe. The occupation of the national park, wildlife ranches and conservancies seems to highlight conflicts over land use and livelihoods in the area. These conflicts have wider policy implications at both the national and international levels. The key policy relevant question emerging out of all this is, what is the most appropriate land use system for the poor in Sangwe?

Government's focus on land seems to be mystifying related, and equally important issues, of how to improve the poor's access to surface and underground water. It seems likely that, in this dry lowveld region of which Sangwe is an integral part, the future of the poor could be made a lot brighter by improving their access to domestic water, irrigated farming as well as commodity markets.

Finally, there remains the question of how the poor could more effectively and meaningfully take part in, and derive financial and other benefits from, the money spinning wildlife industry.

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The Briefing:
This Briefing is one in a series produced by the Zimbabwe Team of the Sustainable Livelihoods in Southern Africa Project. This is a collaborative project bringing together researchers from the UK, Mozambique, South Africa and Zimbabwe. The briefing summarizes research findings and is meant to stimulate feedback.

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